



Sins of *the* Mothers

CARYL
McADOO

A Texas Romance

Book Four, 1851-1853

Praying my story gives God glory!

Five Star Reviews of Sins of the Mothers

Caryl McAdoo does it again with what I think is the best book yet in this series. The characters are so real and have a heap of real issues on their plates from page one. Pick it up and you won't be able to put it down.

--Holly Michael, author of *Crooked Lines* and coming soon
First and Goal: What Football Taught me About Never Giving Up written with her NFL-player son, Jake Byrne

There are so many biblical truths and parallels in *Sins of the Mothers*, it is hard to know where to begin. Although set in the nineteenth century, this is a modern retelling of the stories of both the prodigal son and Hosea, with many other biblical themes: that one cannot live life looking backwards, forgiveness...we all must forgive in order to move on; listening for God's speaking, and the need to be obedient; the evils of drink as several characters make unwise judgements after partaking; and to take care of the widows and orphans.

A delightful young orphan called Francy comes into Mary's life, a child delightfully drawn. I loved her exchanges of dialogue. Mary Rachel is a strong female character who has her flaws - she is far too trusting of men, and believes what they tell her. She is, in consequence, very human, and very likeable. I always enjoy reading Caryl McAdoo's Texas Romance novels, and have a hard time putting them down. This latest offering is no exception!

--Julia Wilson, United Kingdom reader

I've often wondered if the past can repeat itself in a person's life and Mary Rachel Buckmeyer gave me my answer. Love, betrayal, despair, the sweet faith of little children, and the perseverance of a miner. These all made for a wonderful story of what life was like in San Francisco during the gold rush of the 1850's. When I finished the last page of Mary's story, I smiled and thought... I loved this story! But... There had better be another book coming because I want more of these Buckmeyer's! I'd recommend this story to anyone who enjoys reading a good Christian, historical fiction of the 1800's.

--Deanna Stevens, Nebraska reader

Sins of *the* Mothers



CARYL
McADOO

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, places, characters, and events are products of the author's imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

□ 2015 by Caryl McAdoo

All rights reserved including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever- except short passages for reviews – without express permission. For information, address Post Office Box 622, Clarksville, Texas, 75426.

First Edition

May 3, 2015

Printed and bound in the United States of America

ISBN-13 978-1503-1975-4-1

ISBN-10 1503-1975-4-9

Cover Art by Kirk DouPonce of Dogeared Design, Woodland Park, CO.

www.dogeareddesign.com

Author's photograph by The Farmer's Wife Photography, Angela Greenwell, Frankston, Texas

Index

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-one
Chapter Twenty-two
Chapter Twenty-three
Chapter Twenty-four
Chapter Twenty-five
Chapter Twenty-six
Chapter Twenty-seven
Chapter Twenty-eight
Chapter Twenty-nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-one
Texas Romance Characters
Historical Texas Romances
Contemporary Romances
Biblical Fiction
Coming Soon

Dedication

Always to God, Almighty Creator, my glory and the lifter of

my head, the air I breathe, my daily bread, my rock and shield, my very present help in times of trouble! I love Him and long only to bring Him glory!

Then always to Ron, my husband these past forty-seven years, my dearest and most beloved best friend since we were sixteen, my protector, counselor, and care-giver, my lover and my laughter, the kindest man I know.

Without their unconditional love, inspiration, support, guidance, and encouragement, forget any stories, I would cease to exist. But, I've been waiting for this book to honor Mama.

Naomi Ruth Cloyd Lawrence

January 9, 1931 – August 2, 1997

Mama served as my first proof of how very much God loves me. We laughed and played and prayed together. When Ron and I were still in high school, we'd cut class and play scrabble with her all day. If she gave us any trouble, Ron turned her upside down and made her walk on the ceiling, all of us laughing so hard, he almost dropped her on her head.

So much like Christ, Mama had forty-three family members—her six children (three by birth, three by marriage but no less loved), her fifteen grandchildren, her fourteen great-grandchildren, and nieces and nephews—living within a one mile radius. Everyone loved her and wanted just to be near.

When she could barely be up more than an hour at a time toward the end, she'd rise early and start cooking. By the end of the day, Mama called us to come by and get our 'box'. She cut handles in cardboard boxes and had each family's dinner – meat, veggies, salad, and dessert in it.

Such a servant!

Mama loved me well. I love her more.

I can hardly wait to see her again!

A song I wrote for Mama's last Mothers' Day on this earth; bedfast with only three more months...

You Never Gave Up

by Caryl McAdoo
Mothers' Day, 1997

You never gave up on me
You always believed in me
You faithfully guided me
And prayed me through the years.
You kissed away so much pain.
Together we'd laugh again.
You listened and understood
And wiped away my tears.

Oh, a mother is a servant.
She's a picture of our King.
She's the one who does the dishes
and keeps the house so clean.
And though a mother can't be perfect,
Mine seems pretty close to me,
'Cause when I see my Mama's face
I see Jesus.

Acknowledgements

Again always it's God, the lover of my soul, I must acknowledge first. I am my Beloved's, and He is mine.

Always and forever...

Praying my story gives God glory!

And my Sweetest Sugar of them all—my husband. On June 22nd this year, we'll celebrate forty-seven years. After dating a year, then being engaged a year, we both graduated in May then married in June. Such babies we were! Both eighteen, we set up house and started living life as much in love as anyone could ever be. I never would've been published if not for him and his wise counsel.

He's quite the story teller himself!

Thank you, Kirk DouPonce of Dog Eared Design for creating my beautiful cover. What a gifted Christian led by God, you are! A joy to work with.

I have a group I call the Christian eVALUaters, they are the first readers after all the edits are made (five or six, minimum), and sometimes find one or two more to help me make it the best I can. They support me on social media with every cover reveal, book launch, and promotion, and they review all my books! Authors need a few special volunteers, and every one of these ladies—and the few fellers, too—deserve and have my deep gratitude.

God-sent Lenda Selph who continues to bless my soul proofreading for me. If only I could return her great favor. I may not be able to, but my Abba can, and I pray He does! Thank you, Lenda!

And I must acknowledge all my readers! Thank you for reading my stories. Thank you for taking the time to leave a review at Amazon and Goodreads, for clicking 'Share' and 'Like' on Facebook, Tweeting, and recommending my books to your friends. I need y'all and thank y'all and pray for God to bless you for blessing me! My cup overflows!

Proverbs 31:10-31

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.

She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night.

She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet.

She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant.

Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.

Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

All of Caryl's Books

Historical Christian Texas Romances

Vow Unbroken - 1832
Hearts Stolen - 1839-1844
Hope Reborn - 1850-1851
Sins of the Mothers - 1851-1853

Contemporary Christian

Red River Romance
The Preacher's Faith
Sing a New Song
Apple Orchard Romance
Lady Luck's a Loser

Biblical fiction, The Generations

A Little Lower Than the Angels
Then the Deluge Comes

Mid-Grade, River Bottom Ranch Stories

The Adventures of Sergeant Socks
The Journey Home
The Bravest heart
Amazing Graci Guardian of the River Bottom Goats

Miscellaneous Novels

The Thief of Dreams **Warning: not for Christians!**
The Price Paid
Absolute Pi (audio)
Apple Orchard B&B (now *Lady Luck's a Loser*)

Non-fiction

Great Firehouse Cooks of Texas
Antiquing in North Texas

Chapter One



With everyone on the porch for the clan's send-off, Mary Rachel decided for sure and for certain and could wait no longer. She took a deep breath and hugged his neck.

"Daddy, I'm sorry. I really am, but I can't go. No, I mean I'm not going. I can't leave. I won't."

He leaned back and stared at her for too long a minute, his face suddenly stone cold. "What did you just say?"

She grimaced, then steam rose to her cheeks. He softened just like he always had when her mother turned on him. Saying it aloud made it all the more real, strengthened her resolve.

"I cannot be gone for seven months. I thought for a while maybe I could, but I can't, Daddy."

Her new mother stepped close. "But Mary Rachel, why? It's the trip of a lifetime. I promise you'll adore Europe."

"It's just Mary now, please. No Rachel. That's what Caleb calls me."

His voice lowered to almost a whisper; he slipped some of the steel back on. "So. This is about that boy."

"He's a man, Daddy, and you know it. We love each other."

"If he loves you, Baby, then he'll wait. It's only seven months. He should be thrilled you have this opportunity to travel Europe."

"Well, I've made my decision, and I'm not going."

"We've booked your passage."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I should have told you sooner, but I knew you wouldn't be happy about my decision." She looked off at the tree line, hating the disappointment in his eyes, but that was a coward's way. She faced him again. "Like I said, I thought I could. Anyway, let Bonnie take my place."

From somewhere, her youngest sister burst into the middle. "Can I, Daddy? Please take me! I'll be good. Mama, tell him how good I'll be." She turned those doe eyes on him. "Pleeeeeease."



Six miles, north by northwest as the turkey vultures soar from

Clarksville, Texas, the very reason Mary stayed home, rode his best mule, as he skidded the black walnut saw log back to his cabin.

Caleb looked behind. "Slow, girl, almost there."

He nudged the animal a bit further, the timber only feet from his makeshift hoist. Two more steps, then he eased Harley Sue to a stop. He hopped down then rubbed the old girl's near ear. "You sure are a good mule."

The distant rattle of trace chains turned him east; for a minute he stared, then she waved. "Well, look here what the cat drug in."

He unhooked the skid and led Harley Sue to the barn's corral; got back before Lanelle had the brake set on her wagon. "She go?"

"Nope."

He nodded. "You sure? Saw it with your own eyes?"

"Yep, he took the three younger girls, but not the princess." She stood and threw him a smirk. "Help me down."

"Sure." He stepped toward her with his arms held out; she fell into them. He caught her then twirled her around as she wrapped hers around his neck. He set her feet to the ground then stepped back a bit.

Business first. "Anyone see you turn on my road?"

"No, but what difference would it make? I'm only bringing supplies for my kin."

"True, you got it all?"

"A pound of salt pork, two pounds of salt, and a pound of coffee, but you best get yourself to town. Old man Hobbs wants a word with you. Wasn't too happy when I told him to put it on your bill 'stead of Pappy's."

Caleb nodded toward his wagon. "I should have this lumber loaded by Saturday. I'll see to him on my way to Jefferson."

She shrugged then turned and moseyed toward the cabin. "That last batch any better?"

Heading the opposite direction to the well, he soon went to cranking; retrieved the jug, pulled the cork, and took a slug. When he didn't follow, she looked around then trotted to him grinning.

He extended his home brew. "You tell me."

Always a sight to behold, she accepted the jug without an ounce of pretension, licked her lips, took a short pull, then wiped her mouth. "Boogers, Caleb." She grinned then got herself a real drink. "Woo! I'd say that may be the best you've cooked yet."

He took the jug back and sipped a few tastes more. Burned good all the way down. Replacing the cork, he nodded toward the cabin. "You got time?"

She reached for the liquor. "Depends."

He twisted away. "On what?"

"You really going to marry that Buckmeyer girl?"

“Yes, ma’am, I am, and you best get used to the idea.”

“Her daddy ain’t going to like it, and you know it. He’s liable to cut her off. Where you gonna be then?”

“I got it all worked out, and if you do like I say, it’ll work out for you, too, cousin of mine.”

She stepped close, put one hand on his chest, the other on the jug. “How so?”

“Come on inside, and I’ll tell you.”

She pulled back, taking the jug with her. “You got one of these for me?”

“Course, but you best not tell Auntie where you got it if she catches you.”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about her. You best be hoping Pappy don’t ever find out what we been doing all these years.”



From the moment her daddy and his new wife left—the three little sisters in tow—for their big European adventure, Mary not-so-patiently counted the prescribed nine days. On the eve of the tenth, with true love so near, she hadn’t slept a wink.

All night, she waited for the big clock to strike three. Once it finally did, she retrieved the saddlebags from under her bed.

Tiptoeing downstairs, she barely breathed. With each step, her heartbeat quickened until she reached her daddy’s library. Caught her silly self afore she knocked, so strong ingrained her desire to follow his rules.

But even stronger, her love for Caleb opened the door, and she slipped inside, closing it quietly behind her.

He promised he’d come back for her if she didn’t want to go, and they could marry then. He said two years, no more than three. Sounded almost a lifetime. Anything could happen in that much time.

No, she’d made her decision, and there’d be no turning back. She wanted him now, wanted to be his more than anything she’d ever wanted in all her days.

Once inside, she lit the lamp, turning the wick low and eased into Daddy’s forbidden sanctuary. His room. Slowly, she spun the dial on the safe in his oversized water closet. When the final number fell into place, and the handle unlatched the door, she remembered and took a deep breath.

Excellent, he hadn’t changed the combination.

She retrieved her strong box, slipped the key in, and pried the lid open. Right there, exactly as she’d seen the last time, a pile of gold pieces. She carefully counted the coins out into the bottom of the saddlebag, halving them to balance the weight.

One hundred lovely tinkling bits of gold, two thousand dollars, fifty per side. Yes, all there.

Wait. Bank notes lined the box's bottom.

Where had those come from?

Pulling out the greenbacks, she counted them: five hundred and forty-two dollars. With no idea when Daddy added them for her, she decided only to be grateful. When made no difference.

God sent the money, knowing she'd need it. That would buy an extra ton of trade goods if Caleb figured right.

Folding the bills together, she put them in one side and replaced what few clothes she'd managed to pack on top. Then on second thought, decided to put the bills in her stockings. Maybe she'd hang onto the notes as a reserve.

Caleb already knew about the coins, but sure would be fun to be able to produce extra money if the need arose.

Carefully, she locked the safe back then headed to his desk and retrieved the Baby Paterson he kept in the top drawer. Surely her daddy wouldn't begrudge her the loan of the Colt, would he? Should she leave a note?

With the pistol carefully stowed in the right-hand bag, the lantern out, and her eyes well readjusted, she eased into the hall then out the front door. New Blue rose, stretched, and greeted her.

She responded with a shush, giving the dog's ear a good rub, then strolled around the house to the barn. He trotted along beside her.

Enough moonlight to see by outside, proved insufficient inside the barn. She pulled a box of matches from her pocket and lit a candle then quickly blew it out soon as she'd located what she needed.

Shortly, her daddy's horse stood saddled and ready to go. She led him to the far end's double doors then east, until out of earshot of the house. After only two tries, she got herself aboard.

"Go home, Newly! Go on."

Been a long time since she sat a horse, but once she got her dress straightened out, she clucked him into an easy trot. Wouldn't do to spend him without reason. Always best to keep a little in reserve just in case something unexpected happened.

Rose had taught her that. Goodness, what would she do if Indians tried stealing her?

Her heart beat a little faster at the prospect, and she kept a steady scan on both sides of the pasture, but nothing happened. Just like she and Caleb had planned, she beat the stage to Titus's Trading Post in Mount Pleasant.

Of course, no problem with the proprietor. Her father's old friend would be more than happy taking care of the black until someone came for him.

She hated lying, but no one needed to know her plans, not yet. Soon enough, she'd be Miss Caleb Wheeler, and then there wouldn't be one thing anybody could do about it.

That's when she'd be free to share, and not before. Praise the Lord that He arranged her Daddy going off to Europe at the exact perfect time.

A part of her hated doing things this way, but he would never have agreed. And she could never have snuck off with him there either. Yes, sir, everything worked out just fine.

She couldn't wait to get to Jefferson!



Caleb looked around the hotel room. All of his cousin's things were packed in her bag. He extended his hand.

Lanelle took it. "Thank you."

He pulled her to her feet. "You best get on gone. Your flatboat's liable to sail without you."

Placing both hands on his chest, she pecked him on his lips. "Let's just wait and see if Miss Priss is on the stage first. No need to get all hasty. I may be able to ride the steamboat with you after all."

"Mary will be here, just like we planned."

She kissed him again, this time with more passion. "You don't know for sure. A thousand things could happen."

"I do know."

"How?"

"She loves me. You should've seen the look in her eyes when I told her I'd come back in two years to marry her if she'd wait for me."

She backed away and glared. "Do you love that girl?"

"Some." He shrugged. "Maybe a little."

"And how's your devious plan going to work if she couldn't get to her money, huh?"

"Then she can't go. Plain and simple, but she'll have it. Don't you worry. All one hundred beautiful, bright, and shiny gold coins."

"And when are you going to tell her that I'm coming along, too?"

He smiled. "Not until after we're married. Sometime between here and New Orleans, I figured I'll mention we're meeting up with you and my whiskey barrels."

"I still can't believe you're marrying the snotty princess. Ask me, she's way too blue at the mizen."

"Well, I didn't."

"I don't understand why you think marriage is so necessary."

"Lanelle..."

"We should just forget about her once we have the money. That's

all we need to..."

He put a finger on her mouth. "No, we need Mary's compliance; we need her in California, and there's no way she'd ever make the trip with me, without wearing my name. Quit fretting over it. John swears we can sell about anything a miner needs for five, six times what it's going for here. We're going to be rich."

"Sometimes my brother stretches the truth a little."

"Sometimes a lot, but I've read the news reports coming out of California; and that part's true. There's so much gold, the miners have gone plum crazy." He pulled her to him and wrapped his arms around her. "I love you, Lanelle."

She leaned back. "More than Miss Priss Buckmeyer?"

"Of course. I've loved you forever."

She glanced at the ruffled hotel bed. "Show me."

Even with the unexpected delay, he had his cousin and his three oak barrels on the flatboat an hour before The Belle came skidding to a stop. He waited for the dust cloud to settle then walked to the door.

His intended stepped out first with a saddlebag—both sides stuffed full—draped over her shoulder. She fell into his arms.

He kissed her gently and lifted her load. Excellent, plenty heavy. He blew out the stale air of doubt from his lungs, then hugged her tight and planted a real one on her soft full lips. "I love you, Mary Buckmeyer."

"I love you more, Caleb Wheeler. When do I get my new name?"

"Everything is in place. The judge has set aside four o'clock this afternoon for us. The steamboat leaves mid-morning." He smiled.

She clasped her hands together under her chin and squealed. "Ooooo, bless God! It's all working out exactly like you said." She nodded toward the bag over his shoulder. "All there, didn't have one ounce of trouble."

"That's excellent."

"Take care of it for me." She grinned. "I've got some shopping to do."

He shrugged the shoulder burdened with the hand-tooled, extra soft leather pouches. "Need any of these little darlings?"

"No. That's our seed." She grinned. "Where's our hotel?"

He took her hand and led her down the sidewalk to the oversized double doors then nodded inside. "We have room twenty-two, second floor, third door on the right."

She held out her hand.

"What?"

"The key, silly, and don't you dare come peek, I'll see you –" Stopping mid-sentence, she looked around. "Where's the judge?"

He stepped off the boardwalk. She followed. He pointed up the

street to where the courthouse's spiral rose above the sawed board buildings and trees that lined the extra wide dirt road. "His chambers are right on the ground floor, can't miss him."

"I'll see you there at three-forty-five, don't be late."

He laughed. "I was about to say the same thing, but don't you worry your pretty head about me, I'll be there early with bells on."

"Good." She kissed him again then put both hands on his chest and pushed. "Oh, have you got another key?"

"I do."

She winked. "You practicing? Because I do, too." With a nod toward the saddle bags, she pouted. "Mind laying out what little I brought in the room, please, kind sir?"

"Of course not."

"Thank you, then make yourself scarce, and I'll see you at the courthouse!"



Mary watched as Caleb walked into the hotel's lobby. A twinge nicked her heart, maybe she shouldn't have let him watch over the gold coins, but those bags were getting heavy, and well, wasn't like he was after her money.

Had plenty of his own. Adding her savings to his had been her idea—after all.

Mercy, she'd known him forever, back when she was a little kid and him a big boy who didn't even know or care that she existed. Still, she'd set her bonnet for him ever since.

And besides, by half past four, hers would be his, and his would be hers, and it all would be theirs, together, sharing everything forever.

Hey, she made a poem. She repeated her little impromptu rhyme, heading off down the street.

Unlike her big sister Rebecca, who had too many suitors to count before she finally chose and married Wallace Rusk, Mary had never even smiled at another boy. And now, in just a few hours, her dreams would be coming true.

Mis'ess Caleb Warner Wheeler.

Mary Wheeler, she liked the sound of that. Lots cuter than Mary Rachel Buckmeyer. A new name and a new life. She hugged herself then turned her attention to finding herself the right dress, and anything else a bride would need.

She kind of sort of wished she'd confided in her best friend, Sarah. It'd be fun having her there to share the excitement. But she dared not tell anyone, and she could do it alone. She had Caleb.

The next morning, while she sipped coffee in the hotel's dining room, a shadow fell over her heart.

Her wedding fell somewhat short, not exactly what she'd envisioned since a little girl. But the ceremony didn't matter, nor the first awkward night. All that...nothing more than temporary.

What truly held any significance, she'd have for life—his name—Mis'ess Caleb Wheeler. And her love would carry her away on a grand adventure to California by way of New Orleans.

She'd heard so many stories about that town, she could hardly wait to get there and see it for herself. And she had all that buying to do, wouldn't that be so much fun. The horse trader in her pawed the air and whinnied real loud.

She hated that the judge's clerk served as her only witness, but being married—that's what was important.

Who needed a big party with all her family and friends there to celebrate with her and shower her and her new husband with gifts? Her Daddy to give her away? Her new mother, the famous novelist, to give her advice? Not her.

Caleb patted her hand. "What's wrong, Sweetness?"

She looked at him and smiled. "Nothing, just thinking I needed to get word to Daddy."

"Want to write him a letter? Jefferson has a post office."

"No, I was thinking once we reach New Orleans, I'd wire him a telegram."

"How could you? Where would you send it to?"

Chapter Two



“New York, to Mama May’s publisher. I’ve got the address.”

Caleb leaned back, exhaled, then smiled. New York was on the other side of the country. “I thought they had already sailed.”

“No, they were going to see her old home in North Carolina. Sea Side she called it, then spend a few days at her new house on Park Avenue. They don’t leave for another two weeks.”

“Good, that’s great. We’ll be in New Orleans in five days, and...” He shrugged, not enough time for him to get word to Levi Baylor. Last thing Caleb needed would be for the Texas Rangers to come after their little Mary Rachel.

“And what?”

“Well, don’t tell them exactly where we’re going yet. Let’s make sure we want to stay in San Francisco, then you can write them. Maybe they can come visit us in California after they get back.”

She nodded, then matched his smile. “Just now, I saw a bit of fear, didn’t I, husband of mine?”

“No.” Could she really read him so easy? “Well, maybe a little bit. After all, your brother and brother-in-law are two famous Rangers. If your daddy were to sic Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk on me.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“If he did, I wouldn’t have a prayer of keeping you. Not a chance.”

She put her hand on his arm. “Yes, but you’re family now. We’re married, sweetheart.”

“Yes, we are, and I love you, Baby.”

“I love you too, Caleb. Now when does our ship sail?”

He drained the last of his coffee then stood. “Not for another three hours.” He nodded upstairs. “Want to catch a quick nap?”



Well, that was cute, but she really didn’t. Except...a married woman should... Maybe... She let that thought drift away. Why couldn’t Rebecca or Rose or even May been here? Sure would be nice to see how it had been with them the first time.

Mercy, Lord, help me.

The five-day trip to New Orleans proved fun. Well, the days did anyway, then the last evening over a real nice steak, Caleb dropped his napkin on his plate, interlocked his fingers, and rested them on his belly. Looked rather distinguished.

“Hopefully, Lanelle will have some good news for us.”

“Your cousin Lanelle?”

“Yes, ma’am. She rode with our whiskey, to keep it safe. Didn’t trust it to that flatboat captain or his crew, so she volunteered to go with it. Besides, she –”

“But what was she doing in Jefferson?”

“She’s going with us, to see her brother. Didn’t I tell you?”

“No, sir, you sure did not. And what whiskey? We don’t have any hard liquor, do we?”

“Sure, we do. I’ve been cooking it forever. That’s the number one thing John said to bring. Rotgut is going for a dollar a shot. A shot! I’ve been cooking some mighty fine corn squeezing.”

“Cooking it?”

“The liquor! We’ve got three big barrels of it. Can you imagine how many shots are in one barrel?”

“Uh, no. I have no idea.” She stared at him. Why hadn’t he told her all this? She swallowed, and it slid down her throat and turned into a rock in the bottom of her stomach. “So you’ve been making hard liquor, and failed to mention it?”

“Yes, ma’am. Figured you knew. Your daddy’s been buying from me for a while now. What do you think he puts in those hot toddies he and your new mother go to bed on every night?”

“Mama hated liquor, called it the devil’s brew.”

“Have you ever even had a taste?”

She shook her head. “No, never.”

He stood and extended his hand. “Well, dear wife of mine, let’s remedy that right this minute.”

She let him pull her to her feet. Didn’t know about this, but he was her husband. And her mama didn’t live on this old world anymore. God rest her soul. And if Daddy drank it every night with May, what would a little taste hurt?

Wasn’t like she would get drunk or anything. “You don’t get drunk from a taste, do you?”

Bursting out laughing, he placed her hand on the crook of his arm. “No, my precious, sheltered little wife, you definitely do not.” He stopped at the bar, bought a small bottle of brandy.

What that was exactly, she had no idea, but had he really given the man behind the counter two dollars silver? That was outrageous for one little bottle. “I thought you said you make your own?”

He patted her hand. “Brandy comes from wine. You wouldn’t believe how good it is. Now, the stuff I brew kicks a lot harder, but isn’t as tasty. We’ll go easy this first time.”

Tastes ‘good’? Much too weak a word.

She loved the stuff. Never in all her life had she floated two feet off the ground or danced like she did, totally shameless with her husband. But that’s how it was supposed to be, right?

She loved love, and she loved brandy. Both of them sure were grandy. Hey! She’d made another poem. Maybe she should write them down. Could be she’d make a great writer, maybe even better than May.

She hiccupped, covered her mouth with the tips of one hand’s fingers.

Probably even better.

Someone kept ringing a bell. She hated the clanging in her sore ears, and worse, the ache behind her eyes. Where was Caleb? “Caleb? Make it stop. Please make it stop.”

For a second the ringing stopped. Before she could appreciate that enough, the steam whistle cut straightaway through her being. She yanked the pillow over her head then grabbed his, too, but the thing wouldn’t stop.

Man, she’d never been thirstier. She rolled out of bed and wobbled to the water closet. Her mouth felt like cotton. After a flush, she poured herself a glass of water.

Mercy, what was wrong with her?

Was she having morning sickness?

Could she get pregnant that quick?

Wow, she didn’t think so.

She guzzled the entire glass of water down, stumbled back to the bed, then curled up in it. Maybe if she lay real still. The cold water helped some, but not much. She needed coffee. Better yet, she needed her husband.

Where’d he go?

She jumped up and ran to the water closet, barely making the commode before vomit spewed from the depths of her gut. After, she felt minutely better. Coffee finally helped, especially after Caleb put a dash of his whiskey in it.

Three cups of Irish coffee—that’s what he called it—and the ache behind her eyes vanished. The side-wheeler slowed then jerked. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go see.”



Lanelle spotted the happy couple the instant they stepped out onto the third deck railing. Mary snuggled in tight, and he wrapped his arm around her. Made Lanelle want to vomit. She hated them both.

Caleb belonged to her since forever. In her earliest memories, he chased after John, and she ran after the both of them.

How many times had he told her he loved her? And how many times had he? Should have kept track.

She put those sour grapes away. He'd said it would be the same as always, except it wouldn't. Not with the prissy princess hanging all over him all the time. An idea niggled its way forefront.

Miss Priss would get pregnant, wouldn't do anything to stop it. Lanelle gagged.

They must have seen her. Caleb pointed, then his child-bride took to waving both arms like she and Lanelle were friends or something. What few times she'd bothered to speak to the brat, she'd barely been civil.

After all, her daddy was like the king of Clarksville, owned more land, cattle, and cotton than all the rest put together. And even The Belle.

Money ran to money. That's what Caleb claimed.

Dollars had to be the only reason he even gave Red River County's princess a second look. Well, no one could deny Mary Rachael's beauty. Had to give her that. All the Buckmeyer ladies were.

The steamboat neared, and Lanelle plastered on her best smile. She'd make nice just like Caleb wanted, for a while anyway. Then they'd all see. He'd be hers and all hers.

No matter what she had to do until then, he would surely belong to her. She let that thought slide all the way down to her belly then come back up as a real smile. She could play the part, same as he claimed he was.

Too soon they walked the gangplank holding hands. How quaint. And the idiot carried his grip and a set of fancy saddlebags draped over his shoulder looking like such a stupid dandy.

"Well, look at you two, the old married couple." Lanelle pushed Caleb aside and hugged the princess.

Mary hugged her back, giggled, and beamed. "Yes, we are. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Well, of course it is! Absolutely fabulous." She faced her love. "Like you said, Mister Ballantine's warehouse is right on the wharf."

"Our goods arrive unscathed? No problems?"

"Yes, cuz. Stop your fretting. The liquid gold is safe and sound at Ballantine's."

She faced the child bride. "So, you hungry, sweetie? There's this

little place on Bourbon Street makes a great gumbo. I ate there last night, and first thing this morning, I wanted to go back.”

She held her arm out, Mary took it, and she strolled away with her new cousin.

He could come or not.

She didn't care.



This was wonderful, Mary had always liked Lanelle, but Caleb's cousin had hardly ever spoken to her. Guess the age difference didn't matter now that she was grown—and kin. She loved being a Wheeler, had always liked the clan.

The two brothers coming to Red River County from Arkansas together made for good ancestral history.

Shame Caleb's parents had to go back to help the grandmother and run his grandfather's store. But...that's what family did.

That truth pained her heart.

She hated how she'd treated hers, but she'd make it up to them, in two or three years when she and Caleb went home with pockets full of gold. And more stories to tell than May could pen in a lifetime.

All would be forgiven and forgotten, she just knew it. And Daddy would get over her leaving like she did.

For a few steps, she let her mind's eye revel in the grand reunion, all the kisses and hugs.

But then an image of her own mother blotted out the rest—so distraught—telling how very sorry she'd been over hurting her father so much when she ran off with Rebecca's father. How she vowed not to ever marry again without her daddy's blessing.

Had she become her mother?

No, she would never wait ten years to tell Daddy why she'd done what she had, exactly where she was—as soon as she and Caleb settled, she'd write. These were different days with mail getting around much faster.

And the telegraph, it'd surely cross the Mississippi soon and go all the way to California. She could keep him and May right up to date after she and Caleb decided where to set up shop.

No, she was not her mother. She was not a widow.

“There it is.” Lanelle released her arm, stepped up on the wooden porch, and held her arm out as though she owned the place, like the proud proprietor of this not so grand café. It tickled Mary.

The gumbo proved tasty, but nothing like Mammy's. Was there a better cook anywhere? Probably not, and too bad for everyone who'd never shimmied up and put their feet under her table.

And it so thrilled Mary that the cook and Chester had fallen in love

and married. Remembering home, and the folks there, brought a smile.

From Bourbon Street, Lanelle led the way to Ballantine's warehouse. The relief in Caleb's eye when he spotted the three oak barrels tickled Mary even more. Maybe the stuff was sure enough liquid gold.

Thank the Lord it cured her headache.

Her new husband definitely did not have her horse-trading skills; that became all too clear after his first purchase. A case of shovels he paid too much for. She caught the glee in the man's eyes when Caleb agreed to his terms.

Stepping up beside her husband, she looped her hand through his arm. Early on, she smiled and took over negotiations. "And, sir? What kind of deal would you make, say, if we buy two cases?"

"Deal? Oh there's no better deal, not anywhere on the wharf. I'm giving you my best price, little lady."

She faced her husband. "Sweetheart, if memory serves, I noticed two or three other warehouses we passed before we got here." She turned to Mr. Ballantine. "We needed to stop by here first to check on our stock, of course."

It disappointed her that Caleb didn't pick right up on her plan. At least he nodded.

"But I'm certain you understand we need to find the highest quality products for the very best prices. Especially since we'll be buying so much. And not just on this trip." She smiled at Caleb then glanced back at the sweating Ballantine. "We're needing to find an honest dealer we can trust."

"Yes, ma'am, of course, but –"

"I believe you're right, Darlin'." Caleb finally caught on and played along.

"Well now, wait, wait. No reason to go anywhere else. Uh..." He loosened his shirt collar, running a finger around one side and stretched his neck like a turtle. "If you were to get two cases, I suppose I could sharpen my pencil some. A little."

Back and forth the negotiations flew.

Threatening, teasing, and playing the same game her daddy was so good at. She loved it. Hands down, his horse trading skills were unsurpassed in the whole of Red River Valley. His expertise awed them all.

Everyone said it, called Henry Buckmeyer the best. But they'd never seen Mary Wheeler in action.

"Over here, you two. I'm thinking we ought to get some cloth and threads, don't you agree?"

Mary followed the sound of Lanelle's voice. Her new cousin

noddod toward a long table with at least a hundred bolts of cloth.

“Oh yes! That’s a grand idea, and scissors and needles. Thimbles, too. And what’s that over there? Are those tents?”



A copper pressure pot caught Caleb’s eye. Sure would be nice to have a new one, but setting up a still wouldn’t be practical. He’d get the lay of the land first before he got back into liquor making.

With all the stuff the ladies picked out to buy, appeared he’d not have time anyway for anything but loading and unloading. He strolled through to the end of the row. Now where had his horse-trading wife and old man Ballantine gone off to?

He looked both ways then took a left. A hand grabbed his arm and pulled him into a hollow space against a wall. Lanelle kissed him hard, and he kissed her back then put a finger on her lips.

“Be good.” His whisper came out louder than he intended.

“I’m always good, you brute. Want me to show you?”

Of course he wanted her to. He’d been wanting her most every minute for years now, but if she didn’t watch it, she’d spoil everything. “No. Leastwise not now. You need to behave yourself.”

“I need some money.”

He dug into his pants pocket and pulled out a silver dollar. “Here, now get and watch your conduct.”

She stuffed the coin in her skirt pocket then patted the saddlebags draped over his shoulder. “How about a couple of those little darlin’s?”

He glared a moment then pushed past her, needing to find his wife before she spent too much money. He located Mary and the old man on the far side of the building. Good. No way could she have heard anything.

As much as he hated the thought, he had to keep a distance between himself and Lanelle. Well, maybe not totally. But he had to be very careful.

California wouldn’t be far enough to keep him safe from the wrath of Henry Buckmeyer if stories got back that he’d been unfaithful to his precious little Mary Rachel less than a month into the marriage.

Not if all the tales he’d heard were true. And he had no reason to doubt their validity. He did not want to become number eleven. Kill him dead and feed him to the hogs if he hurt her—out of the man’s own mouth.

Caleb chuckled, a bit more reserved that initial time with his then soon-to-be wife around, but first chance the old man and the two Rangers got him off alone, they all laid the law down.

No doubt that any one of the three would do him in at the first sign of trouble.

Yes, sir, he was sure of that, and never in all his born days, would he do anything to intentionally hurt Henry Buckmeyer's baby girl. Nope, no way, no how. But... what she didn't know... Well, now, that couldn't hurt her.

With his Lanelle being kin, no reason he couldn't see her from time to time.

What single female cousin didn't need some muscles or a bit of sage advice now and again? Yes, that's right, and besides, he'd been thinking of something he wanted to tell her to do.

"What are you grinning about?"

Caleb caught himself. "You. You're loving this, aren't you? How much have you spent so far?"

She winked at him then ran her tongue over her top teeth while she looked off. She shrugged. "About seventeen hundred and forty or so. Final negotiations aren't done yet." She pushed him back a ways then leaned in close. "I'm going to get him to take less for me paying all in gold coin."

The old man walked up shaking his head and held out a paper. "Got it all right here, seventeen hundred thirty-six dollars and forty-two cents."

"Man, you were close enough, sweetness." He smiled at the proprietor. Her head for math amazed him. "What else do we need? I'm thinking we best not spend too much more."

"But don't you figure we should carry some spices?"

"Didn't you already get a hundred pounds of salt and half that much black pepper?"

"Indeed I did, but honey, those miners must get awful sick of plain beans. Bound to be a market, don't you think?"

"Going to Californie, are you?"

"Baby, if you think we can sell 'em, by all means, buy some." He faced the old man and nodded. "That's right. Have a guess to how much weight we've got so far?"

"Probably getting close to five ton, another three, four hundred pounds at the most."

"Books! Do you have any novels?"

"No, ma'am."

"How about chalk and slate boards? Bound to be some families there with children who need to practice their letters and numbers."

"I've got chalk, but no slate."

"What about washboards and tubs?"

"Over here." He led the way.

While his wife finished up, Caleb trailed behind.

Even with all the last minute purchases she added to the piles, she dickered the man down to fifteen hundred smooth in gold coin. With passage for the three of them and freight for the goods, he should still have plenty of cash once he reached San Francisco.

Hopefully, John hadn't decided to sell out and try his hand at prospecting, or worse. But from everything he'd heard, his cousin was smarter than that. Besides, the man's own letters claimed the real money hid out in tools and dry goods.

His last missive told of a recently finished new storefront with big plate glass windows he'd paid a pretty penny for.

Selling to the miners. That's where the bucks were, not breaking your fool back trying to extract gold out of the ground. Who wanted to grub in the dirt all day long then sleep in a tent? Not him.

His cousin sashayed up next to him. Actually, everything he'd ever want or need was right here; his love and his wife's money.

Chapter Three



Mary hated it all to blue blazes. Caleb kept telling her it would pass, but so far, that hadn't happened. For three days now, she'd stayed in bed, except to rush to the little water closet.

He had been so wonderful, tender, thoughtful and not the least bit sick himself. She wanted to hate him and all others who weren't, but how Christian could that be?

Not being seasick seemed plain unfair. And to hear him tell it, Lanelle suffered every bit as much, so he had two moaning women to deal with. Poor dear, probably a good thing the constant roll didn't bother him.

He split his time between them, Lanelle down in steerage. Mary dare not venture a deck down. Tinged her heart a bit she didn't pay the extra dollars for two first class rooms.

Reports were that her new cousin whom she loved, she and all the other kindred spirits who retched their guts out multiple times daily wouldn't die. Could seasickness kill a person?

Ooooooh, it certainly seemed to her death might provide sweet relief. She'd never puked so much in her life, and she hated it more than anything.

And, she was missing everything!

By evening of the fifth day, the last night on the steamer, right after the S.S. Philadelphia dropped anchor in the mouth of the Charges River, she'd managed to keep a bit of soup and hardtack down.

Very encouraging indeed.

The next morning proved rather pleasant, sitting in the shade of a cute grass-roofed cafe with a plate of delicious and unusual food.

While the ship's mates and a gang of locals offloaded the cargo onto barges and outrigger canoes, she enjoyed eating fruit and melons by the tons. She'd never had such a variety of fruit at one time in her life and loved it.

They grew right on the trees, too, all sweet and juicy. Got sticky all over her face and hair and hands, a good sticky though.

"How many more days?"

Caleb, who stood watching, turned his attention from the shirtless

brown-skinned stevedores. "What did you ask, Baby?"

"How much longer?"

"The captain said another couple of hours, then we'll head up river."

"No, I mean before we get to California. How many days?"

"Three across the isthmus, then fifteen more to San Francisco, if we don't stop."

"Good." She joined him, watched a minute. "Can you believe how warm it is? To think it's still winter back home. Shame Lanelle's missing all this."

"I'll take her a plate later. It's warmer because we're closer to the equator, less distance to the sun."

"Interesting." Bumping her shoulder against his, she grinned. "Did you get us a room?"

"No. We'll only be here a few hours. I didn't think —"

Comprehension fell like a soft rain on his handsome head and the light came on in his eyes. She traced his cheek with her finger. "A nap might be in order, if you were to be so kind as to rent us one."

He nodded then grinned real big. "A nap would be rather nice." He slipped his hand into hers. "Yes, ma'am, best idea you've had in a while."

"What about your cousin?"

"What cousin?"

Up river, the barges got offloaded onto wagons then on the Pacific side, stowed in the belly of the S.S. Antelope, another of the U.S. Mail S.S. Company steamers. Nice someone had worked all this out.

From what she'd heard, sailing around the horn was horrible—gale force winds, whatever those were, always cold, icebergs to dodge. No. Cutting across the isthmus created a much appreciated short cut.

Not to mention the time saved. Mary really liked short cuts. New Orleans to San Francisco in less than a month. She never could have imagined everything she'd seen or that they'd get there so quickly. Wonderful, absolutely marvelous.

She loved her new life.

The Pacific even smelled different and seemed bluer, definitely smoother, too. The Antelope didn't heave and throw like the Philadelphia in the Gulf of Mexico. She loved it, no sea sickness, decent food, arm in arm strolls round the foredeck, playing cards with Lanelle who recovered more every day.

Best of all though, not a lot to do other than spend time with the best man she'd ever known—maybe short of her daddy, but certainly a close contender. Love was so grand; the adventure so intoxicating.

She could hardly wait to get to San Francisco, and thoughts on

how to set up the business and increase profits filled her spare time.

On the morning of the fifteenth day, after setting sail from Panama City, the Antelope dropped its anchor in the Bay of San Francisco within a forest of other ships. Shortly, skiffs arrived to offload the passengers.

The cargo might have to wait a week or better, or so the captain announced with a shrug.

Even though more than half of the boats littering the harbor were ghost ships, abandoned in the rush to find the mother lode. The rest remained laden with goods and ahead of the Antelope in their queue system.

What a sight! Over a hundred square-sail-rigged schooners and all sizes of steamers—some with, but most without, sail.

Mary never dreamed so many seagoing vessels existed in the whole world.



Footfalls on his new plank floor brought John Wheeler to attention. The hulk of a man that held his tent flap pulled him to his feet. “Well now, Moses Jones, come down from the mountain have we? Where’s Jethro?”

“Left him working.” The bigger man, one of the few around who looked down on John, shook his head. “Another fire?”

“Yes, sir.” John shrugged. “But thank goodness I had time enough to save most my goods.”

“Aye, the devil’s alive in San Francisco to be sure. I’ve come for my new ten pounder with the second growth hickory handle. Has she come in?”

“Yes, sir, did indeed, and those five rods, just like you ordered.”

“Excellent, and have you found a supplier for blasting powder yet?”

“No, but I hear tell there ain’t much difference between it and plain ol’ gun powder.”

Moses shrugged. “Jethro claims the difference is considerable. Swears we can use less and bust out more rock than with the gun.”

“Anything else? Name it, and if I ain’t got it, I’ll turn heaven and earth to acquire it for you.”

Moses roared. “Ha! How about a wife? You can sure order me one of those, if you know where to get ’em. And I ain’t picky either.”

John shared a boisterous laugh with one of his favorite miners. “No, sorry to say I do not. Palace got in a new bunch of sporting ladies, leastwise that’s what I been told.”

The bighearted giant closed his eyes and shook his head. “Bless those girls’ hearts.” He looked up. “What do I owe you, my friend?”

John brought out his balance scales, pencil, and paper. "Well, let's see now."

Once his customer agreed with the final number, Moses weighed out the dust, then returned his poke to his trousers' pocket.

"Finding a lot of color up there?"

"Some, but it's been a slow go to be sure. We've decided to add extra timber and..." He shrugged. "We sure could use another strong back, you interested? And don't be worrying none, a weak mind is acceptable."

John chuckled. "No, thank you though. Placer mining would be bad enough, but hard rock? I prefer ordering and keeping my shelves stocked to breaking my back. Thank you, but no."

"Jethro swears that's where we're going to find the mother lode. The dribs and drabs them boys are picking up in the streams is only the crumbs."

"We'll see. So far, the crumbs been coming in mighty tasty." John smiled, didn't matter where the gold came from long as he got his part.

A squeal lifted him off his feet. He dropped his pencil and ran to the front of the store. "Lanelle! And Caleb. And tell me quick if you know who this beautiful young lady might be. I know she didn't come in with you scoundrels."



Moses stayed long enough to meet John's baby sister, his cousin, and the man's new wife. She definitely was a beauty. He tucked his new sledge and rods in the back of his wagon and headed down the street.

Gunpowder would have to do. Three twenty-pound kegs should be enough to keep him this trip.

Took about all the dust he had on him. Wouldn't do to go flashing any of the nuggets; that surely would bring too many questions.

Once he had the kegs wrapped in oiled skins and inside their straw-lined travel box, he headed north. After ten miles or so, he doubled back three to the trail that led to the pass.

If his partner knew what he was talking about, and so far their claim had surely yielded considerably more than wages, they needed to keep their powder dry in more ways than one.

Way before sunset he stopped, grained, brushed, then hobbled the mules. He built a big fire and laid in enough deadfall to last the night. Almost ready to settle for the day, he grabbed a piece of jerky then eased off fifty steps or so.

Finding a nice straight spruce, he shinnied up. From there, he kept

a hawk eye out until the last bit of light then slipped back to the edge of his camp, but stayed in the shadows. He waited in the stillness, enjoying the forest coming to life.

An owl hooted, then frogs croaked out their songs; crickets and katydids added to the symphonic chorus, along with at least a dozen more sounds he could pick out but not identify.

God's praise filled the night. From his heart, he burst out singing one of the few tunes he could get right and joined in with the rest of the Almighty's creatures.

"Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all there is inside me, bless His Holy Name."

As the fire burned down, he continued singing and quoting scripture in his head.

Then a sweet peace settled over his heart, and he scooted closer, put some more wood on the fire, and wrapped himself in his wool blanket.

Watch over me, Lord. And save Jethro.

Then like always, he drifted off in a handful of heartbeats.

Next morning before the sun climbed very high at all, he caught sight of his partner as he pushed the handcart out of the mine. Jethro spotted him, waved, then trotted down to the cabin. "Any trouble? Anyone follow you?"

Moses set the wagon's brake and jumped down. "Nope, nary a soul. Still no blasting powder. We'll have to make do with the gun. Got us three kegs."

"Glad you didn't blow yourself to kingdom come on the way back. The sledge and rods come in?"

"Aye, they did." He nodded. "You cook anything?"

His partner grinned. "Your favorite, but..."

"What?"

"Well, I didn't know for sure you'd show this morning. I ate it all."

"You're a poor liar, Jethro Risen. You would not eat it all." Moses knew better, at least he hoped he did. "Look here into my eyes and tell me true. Is there something to eat? Or am I going to have to—" He balled his fist and stepped toward the younger man.

Backing a step, his friend held his hands out. "Easy, big boy, I'm only teasing, pulling that giant leg of yours. I've got beans and cornbread."

"And..."

"Rabbit stew."

Moses sniffed, all he could smell was chimney smoke. "You shot a rabbit?"

"Snared him. Idea come to me yesterday while I was cutting timber. Now that you and the mules are back, we need to skid us

some logs. Anyway, I worked out the design in my head, drew it up, then success.”

“Rabbit stew, you say?”

He nodded toward the cabin. “Right tasty, if I say so myself.”

Delicious, and plenty of it. Living the good life. If only his friend would accept God’s free gift of salvation and believe—and if Moses found himself a Godly wife—then everything would be about perfect.

The Lord had already promised to make him rich.



Finally, the trade goods made it off the Antelope. Mary hated it that John’s store had burned, but maybe that was good, too. He had the money to buy the burned-out lots on both sides, but in her opinion, spent too much dust doing it.

She didn’t say so though. Like her daddy, she didn’t go looking to take advantage, but if it came knocking, who was she to turn it down?

Caleb looked from John to her. “What do you think, sweetheart? Will Levi send you some cash?”

“Maybe, if I was to ask, but we did run off, and that would take two months at best. I say that we keep this between us.”

Lanelle frowned, leaned back in her chair and folded her arms over her chest.

“How so, Mary? We’re four hundred short for building what you want, and that’s with us doing all the work. How about we forget the second story; we can all sleep in the store room until we have more cash.”

“No, we need private rooms.” She smiled. “Partners all the way around, goods, land, building, the works. Fifty-fifty on everything?”

John shook his head. “You’re wanting too much, girl.”

“This afternoon alone, we sold five of the shovels we brought and two picks. The goods left are picked over. Now I’m willing to put in more money right now, tonight.”

“You thinking of writing home?”

“Just listen. Can we all agree that the receipts are seed money and that goes back into the store? The Antelope sails in another five days, and we need to have as much cash as possible leaving with it.”

Lanelle unfolded her arms. “Mary girl, pray tell how are we going to live if every dime that comes in gets spent on goods?”

The time had arrived. She loved it.

She turned away from John and pulled up her dress far enough to roll down her stockings and retrieve the green backs. She turned back around and put the money on the table.

“There’s five hundred and six dollars there. We spend four hundred

of it on lumber; leaves a hundred and six for food.”

“Where’d you get that?”

With only a glance toward her husband as his answer for the time being, she never missed a beat.

“Since the whiskey is not going to be replaced....” She waited for Caleb’s nod, then back to John for agreement. “We can use that money for whatever we need for the store and our living expenses—less the cost of the bottles.”

Her new cousin rubbed his chin. “I don’t know. I’ve worked hard for what I’ve got.”

“Oh, and one other thing, the store’s name.”

“What’s wrong with The Wheeler Dealer?” John looked like someone had stepped on his pride.

“Nothing, but Wheeler and Wheeler Mercantile has a much better ring to it. Classy and dignified.”

The store’s name got batted about, but in the end, John agreed to everything. Figured out that half of a thriving business brought in way more profit than one limping along.

Caleb put his hand on her forearm. “Why do we need bottles? We’re doing great selling the whiskey by the shot.”

“True, but we don’t want a bunch of rowdies swilling home brew here, plus, selling it by the pint, we can get more. Might even order some metal flasks like Daddy has. Remember, we saw some in New Orleans. How many shots in a pint?”

“I don’t know, maybe sixteen.”

“There you go. We sell our Texas Gold for twenty dollars a pint, more if the traffic will bear it. If it’s going fast at that price, we’ll double it. On the afterthought, let’s start with thirty then we can always come down.”

Caleb beamed. “I love you, Mary Wheeler.”

“I love you, too, dear husband.” Mary leaned in and gave him a sloppy kiss.

Lanelle waved both hands. “Oh please. Stop it! You two are making me sick.”

Mary laughed. What a tease. Poor girl, so far from home and hearth and nothing but a passel of love-sick miners to choose from. They’d have to find a church. That’d be the best place for her to meet a good man. She had to be lonely.

Later that night while she cuddled with Caleb on their pallet next to the Oliver plow and other farm implements John had brought all the way from Texas, she put her mouth next to her husband’s ear. “I’m late.”

“What?” He whispered back then kissed her neck.

“I’m late, you know, my moon cycle. It’s three weeks past time.”

She could hear his grin. "Oh wife, that's wonderful." He kissed her again. "So what does that mean?"

"A baby, silly."

"No, I meant... You know, us. Do we have to wait now until he comes?"

She scooted up on his chest. "I don't think so, maybe later, but not now."

"John said there's a doctor up on Nob Hill."

"No, I'll find a mid-wife. Men don't know anything about birthing babies." She kissed his neck. "What makes you think it's a boy?"

"I don't know."



A son. Why had he thought that? Caleb knew one thing for sure. Lanelle would not be happy, but somehow he'd make it up to her. He smiled in the dark until his face hurt. A baby boy. He'd always wanted a son.

Chapter Four



“John! Come on and get yourself down here. It’s getting late.”

He looked under his arm. Lanelle stood at the bottom of his ladder holding her empty market basket. “Can’t you see I’m busy? Get Mary to go with you.”

“She’s working with a customer. Best come on if you want any supper.”

He glared. “Take Caleb.”

She grinned then walked back toward the front of the store. John picked up a shingle and went back to work. What could happen? Wasn’t like there was a hayloft between here and the market.

Half an hour later, knees sore and out of shingles, he eased his way down. A glance at the sun surprised him, didn’t seem that late. Why was that sister of his in such a big hurry?

And where were the two of them? Should have been back by now.

Instead of cutting more cedar shakes, he strolled into the store. He loved what Mary had done with the Mercantile. Everything in its place, her books neat and updated at the end of every day.

A true marvel, and as beautiful as she was smart. Best thing he ever did, partnering with Rebecca’s little sis.

If only it would have worked out with Mary’s older sister, he’d still be in Texas helping her daddy with his empire. Shocked the fool out of him when little Miss Buckmeyer walked into his store all grown up and on Caleb’s arm.

About floored him when his idiot cousin introduced her as his wife. She sure was a beauty.

“Hey, John, there you are. How’s the roof coming?”

“Finished the second section. We can put that tarp back into inventory.”

“Good, excellent, sold your plow just now.”

“Really? To a farmer, or has some miner figured out a new way to do things?”

“No, an honest-to-God sodbuster came in. He’s homesteading north of here, brought his wife and boys.”

John rubbed his hands together. “That is excellent news. You tell

him we'd be interested in buying anything he grew?"

"Yes, sir, sure did."

So much like her sister, maybe not as pretty, but who was? He looked around. "Where all was Lanelle going?"

"Didn't she tell you? Said she'd been hankering fish, so I suppose she intended on going by the wharf."

"Oh, no wonder it's taking so long. That's a pretty far piece afoot."

"That's what she said, and from there she wanted to stop in Chinatown, too. Someone told her about some spice that's supposedly ace high, then from there she planned on stopping at the market for whatever else she needed."

She attended to straightening the shelves, refolding and setting it all in order. Kept a fine establishment; never looked so great under his care.

Didn't like it one bit, those two being gone so long, though Mary seemed fine with it. Just like his baby sister to wait until he was on the roof. It all fell into place. A talk with Caleb was in order. If they ruined things, he'd kill them both. "Sounds like a lot of work just for supper."

"She said she didn't mind. Her mentioning fish set my mouth to watering. It was my idea. Caleb didn't want to go, but we made him. Walking to the market is bad enough, but all the way to the wharf and Chinatown? No way would I let her go by herself."

So young and so naïve in many ways, yet such a lady of business. So different from his Rebecca, except she wasn't his, she'd turned him down flat after only two weeks. John made himself look away. Mary was a married woman. And to his idiot cousin, no less. He hoped she'd never discover the truth about his sister and her husband.

"Best, I guess." He looked back, but couldn't meet her eyes. Instead, he focused on her hair. "I'll get back to the roof unless there's something you need me to do."

"No, I'm fine. Can you manage that next tarp by yourself or could you use some help?"

"Oh, I'm out of shingles, so figured to work on cutting more. By the time I'm ready, Caleb and Lanelle will be back, and he can help me."



Lanelle slipped his last button in its hole. "There you go, good as new."

"I don't know about that. But you, my love, are as good as ever."

Smiling, filled with his love, she took a deep breath then exhaled slowly. Now or never. The Antelope sailed in two days. "Caleb, I'm pregnant."

“What? When?” He looked away then back. “I thought you said you’d never let that happen.” His tone carried shards of disgust.

She hated his reaction, hated him for not being happy. “What? You think I did it on purpose? It happened! Now you’ve got to send the princess back to her daddy. We can have a new start here or go on up to Oregon where no one needs to know we’re kin.”

“How far along are you?”

“Two and half months. Must have happened that time at your place back home.” She looked away. He didn’t have to know she’d missed her first cycle. Just like his sweet Mary baby girl didn’t have to know she was never seasick.

“We can’t, Nellie. This is going to ruin everything.”

“No, it isn’t. Not at all, Caleb. You’ve always wanted a son, and well, I am the one you love more than anything in the world. That’s what you said. So...” She rubbed her belly. “Here he is. And best yet, he’s all Wheeler. Ain’t no Buckmeyer blood in him. I thought we could name him after Pappy.”

“Come on, we’ve got to go. I’ve got to think this through.”

She grabbed his arm and spun him around. “There’s nothing to think about, Caleb Wheeler. We’ve got to get married, period.”



Moses dropped his fork in his empty plate, plum sick of beans. Even with the few rabbits Jethro snared, he hankered hard for a real meal. Steak with a heaping pile of mashed potatoes covered in cream gravy and a chunk of light bread, and oh Lord, a tall glass of ice cold milk, maybe two.

“You’re lusting, aren’t you? I can tell. Isn’t that one of the deadly sins?”

Moses shook his head. “Was not.”

His partner smirked. “You most certainly were, I saw it plain as day written all over your face.”

He burst out laughing. “Guess you could be right, But wasn’t a woman I hankered after. Steak and mashed potatoes with all the trimmings, that’s what I’m desiring, and all I was thinking about.”

Jethro laughed. “You just ate, and you’re wanting more food?”

“Oh, maybe only daydreaming. No harm in that.”

“Well, we’re about out of powder, and while you’re in town, look for us a smith, a good one. And go ahead and get yourself the biggest best steak you can find.”

“Not my turn to go.”

“Well, I’m not going. So either you get yourself to town, or we’re back to panning in the creek.”

"It's been six month, Jet."

"Don't call me that, you know –"

"I do, it's true, but –"

"No buts. Make a list of what we need and find us a smith, a good one. Better yet find two. I've got an idea liable to save us bucket-loads of time and effort."

"What might that be?"

"A hammer mill. Shouldn't be that hard to build, but materials for it's liable to weigh better than two ton."

"Jethro Risen, how are you supposing I'm to get all that up here onto the mountain? Especially without anyone seeing?"

"We have the smiths build it in parts. That way, no one could really know what it is. Then we can put it together up here."

Moses laughed. "Fine. Never been sorry I partnered with such a brain, even if you can't cook. I'll go and find us two smiths. You got drawings ready?"

"Of course." His partner smiled. "And there's one more thing I want you to do while you're in town."

"What's that?"

"Ask John Wheeler's little sister to marry you."

Moses snorted. "Now why would I go and do such a thing as that? She don't know me, and I've only seen the girl that one time."

"Yes, and you've been talking about her for a month now."

"Have not. Besides, she isn't even the pretty one. The other girl, the younger one that married John's cousin Caleb. She's the beauty."

"But already married! I'm telling you, because whenever you go to talking about Lanelle Wheeler, there's a sparkle in your eye and you light up all over. Not to mention all the mush you start spouting."

Moses balled his fist and held it toward his partner. "I do not."

"Isn't lying another one of the deadly sins?"

He closed his eyes and nodded. "I've taught you well, Jethro Risen. So if you're knowing the truth, tell me when are you going to turn away from your heathen ways and start loving on Jesus?"

His friend knew him well alright, maybe too well. Was a lie to be sure, denying his attraction to the lovely Lanelle. Truth be told, for the last month, he'd thought of little else. How could he be so smitten after only saying two words to the little lassie?

Three days and over thirty easy downhill miles later, Moses found the first smithy. The man took the drawing, studied on it a bit, then shrugged. "Seems easy enough. What is it?"

"My partner's latest grand invention, but if he wants to spend his dust this way, then who am I?"

For a bit, Moses and the smith danced around the price, then the man finally nodded. "Deal, I'll need half now, the rest in say, a month,

when I'm done."

"Why so long?"

"Lot of work, lot of iron. I'll have to get some of it cast."

Moses extended his hand. "Aye, a month then."

The second and third he talked with couldn't help him. Too busy. Then he found another one; a younger man stoking a charcoal fire, wearing a leather apron. Surely looked the part, except for his age.

"Your pa handy?"

"Handy as a pocket on a shirt before the fever got him. Last I heard, him and ma was living up north on some river."

Moses nodded. Lot of grown men had dropped everything to hunt the mother lode. Lord knew he'd been one his own self. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"No, really. How old are you?"

"Well, I was there though I have no memory of the day. Mama's the one kept up with it until I's old enough. Born March 20, 1826 according to her."

"Twenty-five like you said, sure don't look it." He extended the page with the second part of Jethro's drawing. "Can you make this for me?"

The man studied it more than a minute then eyed him before he nodded. He handed the paper back. "Where's the other three?"

"Other three what?"

"Drawings, that's only a fourth of it."

"How d'you know?"

The fellow shrugged and kept on fanning his fire. "Does it matter?"

"Guess not, can you make me one?"

"Do I get to make the rest? And help put it together?"

Moses laughed. "What's your name, sir?"

"Elijah."

"Well now, Elijah, I'll have to have a word with my partner about that, but maybe. If we can work something out, how long would it take you?"

"Two weeks, maybe three. You got running water?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"Steam would be better."

Normally smart mouths put Moses off, but he liked this guy. Reminded him a lot of Jethro back when. "Steam engines are hard to come by."

"Not really, I've made two so far. One big enough to run your hammer wouldn't be that hard. Got a Long Tom?"

"Sure."

"Same engine could run that too."

"I'll keep that in mind." For a bit the smith haggled, then with the price settled, he stopped working his forge and stuck out his hand.

"I'll need that drawing back and half my money."

Exactly as he planned, Moses got to the Wheeler Dealer, except now 'twas the Mercantile, a bit before closing time. The young lady, Mary, if he remembered right, finished up with an older lady and her son. He browsed some. John sure had laid in a lot more stock. The woman left, and he stepped up to the counter. "John around?"

She nodded. "He's upstairs. Is there something I can help you with, sir?"

"No, ma'am, suppose not unless you know where I can find Miss Lanelle's father."

"Oh, well." She smiled and her cheeks grew red. "Uh, I best get John for you then." The young lady hurried around the counter then stopped. "You're Moses Jones, right? The man we met our first day here?"

"Aye, ma'am. That'd be me. Got a good memory, you do."

Her flush faded. She smiled then hurried upstairs.

Soon his friend shook his hand heartily. "So how can I help you, Moses? Got something special I need to order for you?"

"First, I need a favor, then I'll tell you why I really came."

The proprietor laughed. "Well sure, how can I help?"

Moses pulled the pouch out of his pocket and handed it to his friend. "I'd like you to cash that out for me. Dollars if you got 'em."

John opened the sack, looked up, then strolled to his front door and locked it. He turned back. "Where'd you get these?"

"That's exactly the question we're trying to avoid. If you don't have the green backs, dust will do."

"We got it." He stepped toward the back. "Mary, can you come here, please."

Shortly John and his cousin's lovely wife had the money counted out, just short of two thousand. "Now my friend, the real reason I'm here."

"Yes, of course, another favor?"

"I'd be honored if you'd let me take you and your sister to supper. Been hankering for a good steak, and I'd like the company."

"Really? Uh, sure, Moses, be pleased to." He laughed, "Not exactly what I expected. Don't know what I expected, but that definitely wasn't it." He faced Mary. "You and Caleb be alright for the evening?"

She smirked. "Of course, we will. I'll go tell Lanelle to get ready."

Seventy-four dollars for the three of them, but Moses didn't care. Best steak he'd had in years, maybe ever. He waited until the lovely lady finished her meal, then faced her brother. "John, I'd like your permission to marry your sister, if she'll have me."

The lady in question gasped then leaned back in her chair. “Mister Jones, I appreciate the steak, I do. It was delicious and your company pleasant, but I hardly know you.”

“I understand, and of course we can have as long a courtship as you believe is proper, but I’m smitten. I’ve not been able to think about much else for a month now since that first day when my eyes were blessed with the sight of you.”

John touched his hand. “Well, my friend, this is unexpected, again. You’ve come to town full of surprises, haven’t you? And I must add, a first. Most miners interested have been asking her right there in the store. You’re the first, Moses Jones, to whom I give my blessing.”

“Then that’s a yes?”

“Indeed, you have it. You’ve only Lanelle to convince, and I’ll throw in my high opinion of you.” He looked to his sister. “He’s a good man, Nellie, one of the best I know here in San Francisco.”

He faced the lady that he hoped would become his bride. “If I had time, I’d go to Texas and ask your father, but I figure your brother here will have to do under our circumstances.”

“What do you say, Lanelle? Will you accept this Irishman to come courting?”



No, she wanted Caleb, but so far, all he could do was hem and haw around the subject of marriage—whenever she got any chance to talk with him. She hardly ever caught him alone anymore. “How old are you, Moses?”

“Thirty-four. Be thirty-five later this year, in October.” He rolled his R.

“Been married before?”

“No, ma’am, never.”

“You visit the sporting ladies?”

John put his hand on her forearm. “Lanelle.”

“John, leave her be. She can ask me anything and I’ll answer her true.” He turned back to the woman. “Your answer is no, never, ma’am.”

“Never ever, not even one time?”

“Aye, that’s correct. Not ever, not with anyone.” He smiled and leaned in close. “I’m a virgin.”

Now that was a shock, shame she couldn’t say the same. “You cashed in a lot of gold this afternoon, is there more where that came from?”

John shook his head but kept his peace and didn’t chide her again. Maybe he wanted to know the answer, too.

“Aye, ma’am. Seems we’re getting mighty close to the main vein,

though I'm sure you understand why I'd ask you to keep that piece of information under your hat."

"Of course."

He laughed, then leaned in close again. "Getting close to the mother lode, we're thinking."

"How's your partner going to feel about us, if there ever was to be an 'us'?"

"Jethro Risen is the best heathen I know. This very night was his idea. Told me to have a steak dinner and ask you to marry. Seems he'd been hearing me gush about you for a month now. By the way, Miss Lanelle, are you a believer?"

"Yes, sir, baptized when I was nine. John, Caleb and me all got saved at the same camp meeting."

"Good to know. I was hoping that'd be the case. So what do you say? I can't come too often, but I'll take every opportunity to spend time with you until you know if you want me or not."

She closed her eyes. Well, sure would get her cousin off his duff. She could find out for sure and for certain, as Miss Priss would say, exactly where his love and loyalties lie.

If he wasn't going to send his princess wife back home to her daddy where she belonged, then maybe she ought to marry this man. John seemed to like him well enough.

And bastard...well, a real nasty word any way a person looked at it.

"When you coming back to town, Moses?"

"A month. Three weeks at the earliest."

She nodded. "Come see me, then. Maybe I'll know my heart."

"Fair enough."

She smiled, but there wasn't anything fair in this life. Not for her anyway.

Chapter Five



Lanelle set her basket on the table then smiled at the little princess. "Want to get out?"

"No, not this morning, I've got too much to do."

Of course she did, the first lady of business. That's what her brother called smarty pants. "Know where John is?"

"I do." Mary stopped her pencil from writing more on its list and actually looked up and gave Lanelle her attention. "He's in the attic, they both are. You off to the market?"

"Thought I'd get some vegetables for a stew. What are they doing up there?"

"Putting in that vent they had made."

She nodded.

Though she knew exactly where the boys worked, she succumbed to continue playing Caleb's stupid games. "Well, maybe one of them can go with me. I hate being a single woman in this town, can't go anywhere alone and feel safe."

Mary nodded then returned to her ledger and lists. So eat up with the store, the princess didn't even have a clue. "Stew for supper, huh? Sounds good. I could make a pudding if there's any good-looking berries, or fruit for a cobbler maybe, if not.

"Caleb loves pudding."

"Yes, and I have everything for cookies here."

"Stew or soup, depending on meat available. Don't know which yet, nothing really sounds good. You craving anything?"

Mary looked up again. "Vegetable soup sounds fine to me, and something light to go with it, maybe a nice salad?"

"Sure, I love soup, too. The men are liable to fuss over a meatless meal, but who cares?"

Mary chuckled then turned her focus back to the papers spread over the table. Lanelle marched upstairs then climbed the ladder up through the scuttle hole. Caleb and John huddled at the far end looking at the new hole in the wall.

She stepped off the last rung onto the wooden floor. When did they put all that up there? With a good layer of hay, it could be a loft.

"Brother dear, I need a private moment with Caleb."

John faced her. Even in the shadows, she could see the disgust on his face. “No, you don’t. We’re busy here. Everyone is. Why aren’t you?”

She stepped closer. “That’s none of your worry, and oh yes, I do need a minute and I will have it. Please skedaddle. Caleb, tell him.”

“He isn’t going to tell me nothing, Lanelle. You two are fixin’ to mess everything up. I don’t know how y’all live with yourselves.”

“Hey, everything’s already messed up. It’s all been wrong since our cousin here got the bright idea to marry the princess—or rather her money.” She looked past her brother to Caleb.

He only shrugged and John kept working.

“Oh, fine, guess the whole world can hear our business. It’s been over three weeks, Caleb Wheeler. Moses is likely to be here any day now.”

Standing, he stretched his back. “I know.”

“Well, what is it going to be? Me or her?”

John rose, too, and stepped in front of Caleb. “Do you even hear yourself, Nellie? They’re married. She’s having his baby.”

It took everything inside her not to scream out so was she, but she kept her tongue in check. “That’s easily remedied, brother. We love each other, have forever.”

“Well it’s wrong.”

She leaned out. “Isn’t that exactly what you said, Caleb? Go ahead and tell him, tell him all of it.”

John threw an arm out, palm up. “All of what?”

“Your sister’s gone and got herself...” He swallowed then looked away. “She’s with child.”

“What?” He spun back around. “Oh Sis, how could you?”

“Me? How could I? And I’ve got myself... You men are ridiculous. It’s him, too! I did not do this alone! He’s the one who went and married Miss Priss.”

“Keep it down, Nellie.” Caleb stepped around her brother. “Look, I’m sorry. But I can’t divorce her.”

“Oh? Are you afraid someone might hear? And why can’t you? I’m the one you love, and I’m giving you the son you’ve always wanted.”

“She’s pregnant, too. You’ve had your eyes open all along. She’s innocent. Mary didn’t know, and she hasn’t done anything but be wonderful at every turn.”

“Oh, wonderful is she? You’re a fool, Caleb Wheeler!”

“No, Lanelle. Think about it. I sure have. We can work it out.”

She closed her eyes. Her pounding heart fell and pounded in her gut. She was going to be sick. “Well then, what? What are you planning?” She clinched her fist. “You think you can have us both?”

“I...uh –”

“Keep on sneaking around with me then act all high and mighty with her, playing your husband role to the nines? So is that it? I’m your harlot, and Mary’s your wife?”

“Oh, Baby, no.”

“Don’t you dare ‘baby’ me! For ten years now, you’ve been having your way with me, and lying your face off. Well, no more! I’ll marry Moses Jones, if he’ll have me, and give him your baby boy!”

“No, you can’t do that. You don’t love him.”

“So? What do you think that matters? It doesn’t! Not one bit!” She turned and slid down the ladder just like she once did back home, back when life was grand, and he belonged to her, lock, stock and barrel, all hers.

She hurried downstairs and took the back door outside, running. Then the tears came, hot, horrible tears. She kept running. But she couldn’t get a good breath. She slowed, gasping, sobbing.

People stopped and watched. She wiped her cheeks and gulped breaths to keep from crying. How could he do this? How could he betray her so? Because he didn’t love her! That’s why.

He didn’t love her at all.

Never had.

She was the fool!

Mis’ess Moses Jones. Didn’t sound too bad. A whole lot better than delivering a bastard son into the world. She needed a drink, a stiff one, maybe three. Instead of going to the market, she turned right and strolled down the street.

Walked into the first saloon she came to, a seedy looking place. Last night’s cigar smoke and puke stunk the place up. The few men littered about gawked at her, and reminded her she was alone.

Why did they always have to ogle like that? She hated it. The barkeep smiled, maybe like a new sporting lady just walked in looking for a crib.

She slapped a silver dollar on the bar. “Whiskey.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



Moses hit the rod, Jethro turned it. Blow after blow, the rhythm so familiar, so taxing.

“That’s good.” Jethro pulled the one-footer out and picked up the two foot rod. “Need a breather?”

“No, let’s get this last hole done.”

Pound. Turn. Again and again and again. Moses let his mind’s eye feast on his love while he worked. Make her mine, Lord, soften her heart toward me. Strike a blow. Breathe. Do it again. Bless her Father, take away the pain I see in her heart. Convince her of my love.

Jethro held up a hand. "My turn."

No way was he about to argue. Moses let him. After too many blows to count, the rod dug into the rock, then its hole packed with powder.

Jethro braided the three lengths of twine then picked up the keg and laid the fuse line back ten foot. "Looks good to me. You?"

"Aye, me too. Give me the matches."

"No, get yourself on out and let me."

"Isn't it my turn?"

"No, you clumsy oaf. It's never your turn, now get on back."

Moses had to agree, running with his head down wasn't easy for him. Not that Jethro hadn't stumbled a time or two. "You be careful now."

"Of course, go on."

The blast loosened more rock and more gold. Seemed to Moses every load that got run through the Long Tom proved better than the last. That night while he sat on the cabin's porch admiring God's handiwork, Jethro toed his boot.

"Been three weeks, partner. You best get on down to town tomorrow."

"Come with me. Meet Lanelle."

"No, I'm not going back, not ever."

Moses looked at the only real friend he'd ever had. "God can –"

"Hold it. Didn't we have church yesterday?"

"Well, what little you'd allow."

His partner grinned.

"Look, forget me going back. And this time, I want you to stay a week. Spend some real time with the woman 'stead of asking her to marry you then lightin' a shuck. You're going to make her think there's only one thing you're interested in, and women...well, they want more."

"A whole week? Why so long?"

"That Elijah, the one who said he could build a steam engine?"

"What about him?"

"Spend some time with him, too. See what kind of a man he is."

"What are you thinking, Jethro?"

"I'm thinking we might need us another partner."

"You wanting me to bring him up here?"

"I think it's time to register our claims. And if this kid is the genius I think he is, then..." Jethro leaned back and stuck his feet out.

"How'd you like not to ever swing another sledge hammer?"

"I'd love that; aye, 'tis true."

"So would I, and I'm going to need another bunk mate, too, seeing as how you're getting married. And there'll be another cabin to build."

“You don’t know that.”

“My friend, any woman would be crazy not to accept such a man as you. A fine Christian gentleman, and a rich one at that.”

That night he dreamed of the sweet lady. The next day as he drew closer to town, the more his heart swelled.

Oh Lord, make it so. Your Word says you’ll give me the desire of my heart. And You full well know from that first moment I put eyes on the lass, I’ve wanted Lanelle. Want to wrap her in my arms and keep her, never let anything bad happen to her again. I’ll love her true, Lord, if You’ll see Your way to give her to me.

That first whole day, he stayed with Elijah, not able to make himself go to Wheeler and Wheeler Mercantile and see her. What if she said no? The second day, he looked in on that first smith, the man had not even started on the piece he hired him to build. The boy had already finished with his and begun on the second.

After a rather heated discussion, Moses settled for most his dust back and the drawing.

The third morning, right after a nice three-egg-and-double-stack-of-flapjacks breakfast, he about fell off the sidewalk. Right there, marching up the boards, his lady herself—Lanelle Wheeler—swished her full skirt with her gaze fixed on him.

But no smile graced her pretty face.

“Moses Jones.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She drew up close and stopped. “I’ve heard from no less than three folks that you were in town. Why haven’t you come calling?”

“Uh...” He couldn’t lie, that would never do. The good Lord hated lies. “Uh, well...you see, ma’am...I was afraid.”

She burst out laughing. Glory be to God above! Then she smiled at him, and her eyes twinkled. She stepped right up in front of him less than a foot away. “Moses Jones, of little ol’ me?”

Lilacs and honeysuckle, and all sweet flowers is what she smelled like, so close she was. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, filled his lungs with her sweetness. All his fear melted away.

And he returned a genuine grin. “No, my darlin’ lass, not of you. Of what you were going to say.”

She turned and held out her arm. “We need to talk, sir, somewhere private.”

“Where’s John, ma’am. Don’t we need a chaperone for your honor’s sake?”

“No, sir. Now I’ve shamed myself enough coming here. Is there somewhere private you know or should we talk right here on the sidewalk?”

“Elijah’s shop is around the corner. We can talk there.” He

extended his arm, and she looped hers through it. Her touch thrilled him, sent waves of pure bliss from her fingers all the way to his heart and made it beat irregular to be sure.

He slipped the young man a dollar. "Flapjacks are extra good this morning."

Elijah looked from him to her then laid down his hammer, stripped off his leather apron, and vanished.

He stepped behind the forge. "This private enough?"

"Yes, sir, I suppose it is." She lifted her chin a bit, looked so cute. "Well."

"Well what?"

"Are you going to ask me?"

Ask her what? His heart pounded. What was he supposed to say? Then it hit him like his ten pounder right between his eyes. "Will you marry me?"

She nodded, then closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. What was it? She nodded, but did she hate so much the thought? When she opened them again, she looked at him straight on. "Moses, there's something you need to know first."

"Yes, ma'am, I know that you don't love me yet, but that will change, I'm sure of it."

"There's more."

"Don't matter, whoever or whatever has hurt you, it don't make the least bit of difference to me. You are the woman I've been waiting for and I knew it the first time I saw you. You'll make me the happiest man on –"

"I'm pregnant."

"Dear Lord." He recoiled. Her words hit him harder than any fist ever had. And hurt more, too. He took a deep breath, then another. The silence in the air of that shop was deafening. He swallowed. "Don't matter, Lanelle. I'll have you all the same."

"There's more."

His chest heaved. How, Lord? How could there be more? Would she rip his heart all the way out? Right now in Elijah's shop? Tears welled then ran down his cheeks, but he did not wipe them away. "Tell me, Lanelle, tell me true. Say it this one time, then I swear to you, it'll remain behind us forever."

Tears ran down her cheeks. The bravado she'd wore in cracked then melted away.

Poor little thing, so broken. She came up close to him and slipped her tiny hand into his.

"I must tell you that I'm in love with Caleb, have been since only a girl. He's the baby's daddy."

Sobs racked him. Tore at his core.

Oh Lord, I thought You told me...how can I bear this pain? Help me, Father.

He held his arms out, and she fell into his embrace. For the longest, tears flowed, wetting his chest and her hair. Finally, she leaned back. "Moses, I swear to you, I'll make you the best wife ever."

He sniffed. "I love you, Lanelle, from that first moment."

"I'll be faithful. I'll cook for you and keep your home, wash your clothes. And the baby...I swear he won't be any bother to you, not one little bit."

"No, no, my sweet, I love wee babes, and you don't have to do none of that, I'll hire us a maid, and oh..."

"I'm forever grateful to you, Moses, and I'll show you that as long as we live. I promise you. Thank you, dear man. I can never thank you enough."

"No, ma'am, 'tis I who'll be thanking you, and I'll –"

She silenced him with a kiss. "There's a preacher not far from here."

"That's a good thing to know."

"Let's get married today. Right now, can we?"

He nodded and leaned in close. She pressed her lips gently against his, not what he'd envisioned, but for now, it'd be enough.

Praise God, the Lord could make all things new.

Chapter Six



“I’ll be back in a week.”

Mary pulled her gown tight over her belly, turned sideways and patted her growing waistline. “But Rebecca Sue does not want her daddy going anywhere.”

Caleb sat up. “It’s what I know best, sugar. And we’re about out. You have to admit, the whiskey money sure has come in handy.”

“It has, and I do, but there’s plenty of work here.”

“For you and John, yeah. Other than unloading and stocking, not for me. Not since we finished building. Please don’t fuss. There’s not a lot here for me to do.”

She climbed into bed. “Well, how about only four days then?”

“If I can find what I’m looking for, but if the water’s not right then liquor will just be rot gut.”

“What about white oak? Where you going to get real Texas white oak barrels?”

“I’ll have your daddy send me all I need.”

“Uh, now there’s an idea. Are you crazy? They all hate us now. Not one word. Daddy must have forbidden every last one of them, or Rebecca would have answered my letter. They don’t want anything to do with us. Forget them helping.”

“Oh, it’s only been six months. He’s not even back yet.”

“Do you believe for one minute that the moment he got my telegram, he didn’t send word? I guarantee you, they all know. And my letter is bound to have been delivered to Clarksville by now. Didn’t you post it the first week we were here? That was like six months ago. But why else do you think someone hasn’t written? It isn’t like they can’t. Mercy, a stamp is only fifty-two cents.”

“Heard it’s dropping to thirteen cents, soon. I’ll write Uncle BJ, get him to ship us some oak planks. There’s plenty of carpenters here. We’ll make our own barrels.”

“Promise me, no more than a week. Either way. Sweet water or none. Rebecca Sue and I want your word on it.”

He kissed her. “Sure it ain’t little Caleb wanting his pap handy?”

She kissed him back. “Well, whatever this baby’s name is, no more than seven days, promise?”

"I do. Like I said in the beginning, I'll be back in a week."

"Smarty pants." She hated the thought of him going, but at least he'd get a chance to look in on Moses and Lanelle. Meet the mysterious Jethro Risen. Shame she couldn't go, too. But then no telling what the store would look like without her for a whole week.

The more she got to know John Wheeler, the less she liked the way he did things.

"I'll miss you."



Second morning from town, Caleb found the rutted trail and pass that led to their mine. Easy enough, but instead of driving on in, he stopped short, pulled the wagon behind a big pine, then unhitched the mules and hobbled them.

With his last two pint bottles in his pockets, he retrieved the jug and a nice piece of jerky from under the wagon's seat.

Their mountain weren't no hill for a stepper like him. He climbed to the ridge opposite from where Elijah claimed his new cousin had built her a cabin. Staying well hidden, he watched the three men's comings and goings.

Bunch of busy beavers. He resisted pulling a cork and toasting their industriousness going after the gold. What he wanted wasn't in the rock, but in that new cabin. What a fool he'd been.

After Elijah ran the second load of ore through the iron hammer mill, then moved on to the long tom, it struck Caleb. A spring fed the rocker. He moved out, staying low and hidden. Once he got a good ways past the mine, he crossed over.

Without much scouting at all, he found the water's source.

The fair-sized pool tasted sweet with a hint of mineral. His heart flipped, exactly what he needed. The water could have come from the same spring as back home. Moses Jones and the mysterious Jethro Risen didn't have any idea what they had.

He set the jug in the icy water, straightened his back, and marched straight to his love's cabin, patting each pocket.

Keeping hidden from view of the mine, he made it all the way to her cabin without being seen. She sat on the porch shelling peas, letting the pods drop into her lap. Her belly had swelled alright, but not nearly as much as Mary's.

Still, Lanelle carried his baby.

He drew near and pulled a pint out. "Thirsty?"

She looked up, gasped, then shook her head. "Caleb Wheeler, where'd you come from?"

"Been scouting springs for my new still, found a nice one a ways back." He extended the bottle. "I brought this for us now, and there's a

jug cooling in the source pool. Should be ice cold by supper.”

“You can't stay, you need to go.” She stood. Pods and snaps fell to the boards. “Go on now, before Moses sees you?”

“Now Nellie, my love, is that any way to talk to your baby's daddy?”

“Moses Jones is the father of my baby. I ain't kidding. I want you to leave now. Or do I have to call my husband?”

The bottle slipped from Caleb's hand, hit his boot then bounced away. Never in all his born days had she talked to him that way. Never, no matter how mad she got. He filled his lungs.

“Sweetheart, come on. I love you. You know I do. And I made a big mistake. Come and go with me. We'll get married; you know you love me. And we've always knowed we's meant for each other.”

“What about Mary? She know you're here professing your love to me and trying to get me to run off with you? I bet not! This is just another one of your lies.”

“Naw, Sugar, I ain't.”

“Sure. Talking all sweet, trying to trick me into lightin' a shuck and ruin the best thing I ever had. Moses loves me true.”

“Didn't tell her, but I told John. He's in love with her, or hadn't you noticed?”

“Of course. You think I'm blind? But what does that matter? Not one whit! I'm married, Caleb. You had your chance. I promised to be faithful to my husband, and that means something to me and God. Moses is a good man.”

His stomach churned, and his cheeks burned. He hated the words coming out of her mouth. “Nellie, from that first time, we've been married in the eyes of God, says so in the book. Didn't you know that?”

Staring at him, she held something in her eyes he hadn't ever seen before. She glanced at the pint bottle on the ground then back to him. “No, and I doubt it's true, but I'll ask Moses. I don't love you anymore, cuz.”

“What?”

“I'm married to a real man now. Don't need you or your liquor.”

She strolled to the end of the porch, reached up, and grabbed hold on the rope dangling from a fair-sized bell hanging there. “Sure not very smart to let my husband catch you here.”

“Wait.”

“I don't think he'll take too kindly to you asking me to run off.”

“He won't think nothing. I'm only your cousin come to visit and bring you a little wedding present.”

“Oh, he'll think plenty, trust me, because he knows it all.”

“Wait. You didn't tell him about us, did you? Did you?”

She laughed, then nodded. "Of course I told him. Why do you think we've been sending Elijah for supplies?"

Caleb stepped back far enough to check the mine's opening. Nothing, no movement. He looked back. She was so beautiful, but different from Mary in a mature, seductive way. He'd never wanted her more than at that moment.

Why had he been so stupid? "Last chance, Nellie Wheeler. Come on, come go with me."

She shook her head and clanged the bell. "Mis'ess Lanelle Jones to you."

He turned and ran.

She whipped the rope again, clanging that blasted bell to kingdom come.

He picked up the pace, and sprinted as fast and as far as he could.



Lanelle watched until he was out of sight, then stepped off the porch, retrieved the pint and popped the cork. She took a nice long pull.

Oh Lord, thank You, and please never let him come back.

She sank to her knees, and tears flowed down her cheeks. Took half the little bottle's contents before her sobs eased then stopped.

The image of Caleb Wheeler running for his life flashed across her mind's eye. He sure hauled it out of there. It tickled her good, and she started with a giggle, then blew the next little swig out her nose.

After a laughing fit, she went to gathering the spilled peas and snaps. They sure looked sweet and she couldn't wait to cook them.

Rinsing off as much dirt as she could, she put them on to boil. She loved the cookstove Moses had bought her. He still wanted to hire her a maid to cook, but she wouldn't hear of it.

Scouting water for a new still, huh? While she finished supper, she toyed with the notion of Caleb being just up the mountain cooking mash, but made herself put that idea out of her head.

Moses would never allow him to be so close and... The tears welled again, but she closed her eyes and forced them away.

He picked Mary, not her.

If Lanelle was so stupid as to run off with him, first cold snap or least bit of trouble, he'd be right back begging the princess for one more chance.

Why, oh why, did she love him so?

The men showed right after the last blast. All three couldn't say enough nice words about her cooking, then like most nights, Jethro and Elijah took their leave.

How she dreaded it.

Not one part of her wanted to, but she had to. No choice about it. She pulled him to his feet, and pressed herself into his chest. He smelled of gun powder and man sweat. Her Moses could never be mistaken for a dandy, even fresh from the barber.

He wrapped his arm around her. "Something wrong?"

She leaned back and shrugged. "Caleb stopped by earlier."

Moses nodded. "Where is he now?"

"Don't know. He lit out when I went to ringing the bell." She hoped her voice didn't betray her heart. "Should have seen him run." "What'd he want?"

"Me to run off with him." He stepped toward the door, but she grabbed both hands and pulled him back. "Leave him be, Moses."

Oh, how she hated to give him cause to worry.

He let her stop him then only stared at her.

Even in the bit of lantern light, his pain so evident that her heart hurt. "Can't have him coming around. Don't know what I'd do. If I lost you and the child. Not knowing how you feel about –"

"I told him you know everything. Don't worry. He won't be back."

For the longest, he stood there holding her hands, then she backed up a step and nodded toward the bed. "Come to bed, husband of mine. Let your wife kiss all your troubles away."

He nodded then chuckled as though that notion appealed way more than him out in the dark hunting the yellow-bellied coward.



Once Caleb found the mules and hitched them back up, the muscles in his neck relaxed a bit. That monster wouldn't come after him. Lanelle had lied to her husband just like she lied when she said she didn't love Caleb.

She'd always loved him, and she always would.

Probably told Moses that the baby's pap was some penniless miner.

Heading back down the mountain, he got plenty far before stopping for supper. Not until after he finished off the pint, did he remember the jug. How stupid could he be? Why had he thought she'd slip off to that pool with him?

He chuckled.

Maybe because she'd been sneaking off to see him her whole life.

Only had to wait a while. She'd be back.

The gold would run out, and Jones would be off to the next claim, leaving his sweet cousin in that shack. What chowderhead would want to raise another man's son?

That thought comforted him the whole way back to town, but the closer he got, the more he figured he deserved a quick drink. Only

been gone four days. She'd never know.

Dropping the wagon and mules at the first livery he came to, he headed straight to Chinatown. Mary never went there alone. One reason he and his Nellie liked it so much.

He pushed open the saloon's doors, waited for his eyes to adjust, then strolled inside.

"What'll it be, sir?"

A Half Eagle slapped the bar. "Whiskey, and leave the bottle."

"Yes, sir. You in the need for company?" The barkeep nodded toward the far corner, two scantily clad ladies smiled at him. He put the bourbon and change on the rough boards. "One ounce of dust, one hour."

Tales regarding oriental sporting ladies pushed front and center in his mind. Many a man had told him stories hardly believable, but he'd never...he shrugged. "Kind of steep price." He screwed off the cap and took a long pull.

Fire and ice lit him up good. He studied on the younger one. Best he could see, the girl wasn't much older than his Mary. She rose and stepped into the light.

Her slanted almond-shaped eyes and that come-on-over smile hit him hard. He took another long pull. She strolled toward him, her feet floating over the wooden floor. Never in all his days had he seen such a dark-haired beauty.

Her scent reached him before she was close enough to touch. So light and sweet and totally intoxicating.

"Hey mister, you buy a lady a drink?"

Nodding, he held out his bottle. She reached past him and brushed against his arm sending zingers off in two directions. What a tiny little thing. He breathed in lilac water.

She leaned back with a shot glass in her hand. "You make it a double for you pretty China Doll? I'm very thirsty."

His hand trembled as he poured. He took another guzzle off the bottle, then poured a second shot for her.

"You bring it and come with me. You like, no?" She wrapped herself around his arm and led him up the stairs to her small room.

Silk draped her bed. Maybe a dozen candles flickered and cast a myriad of shadows. He turned to her, and she kissed him. Not like any sporting lady had ever kissed him before. The stories must all be true, and he figured he should have his own.

His China Doll reached inside his chest and stole his heart.

Later the next evening, she put on a wool dress and proper bonnet with a shawl and went with him to the stable. She batted her eyes at him while he made a deal on the wagon and mules.

Not like there wasn't plenty of money to buy more, and he just

couldn't stand the thought of anyone else being with his beautiful China Doll.



While waiting outside the mine's entrance, off to the side out of the blow path, Jethro elbowed his friend. "You've been extra cheery these past few days, you sick?" He loved ribbing the big lummo.

Moses glanced over then smiled and looked toward the hammer mill. "I think she's falling in love with me."

Jethro did a slow three sixty. Elijah worked his oil can. Man, that fellow loved his machines. "She tell you that?"

"You know I made her promise not to until... But, well, uh... Last three nights, she... Uh..."

"Say no more." He hadn't been thrilled with the young woman when Moses first came home with her, but no denying the joy she brought. "You sure she's not just grateful you didn't kill her cousin?"

"Maybe, but I don't think that's totally it. She sure seems different." Had to give it to the gentle giant. Seemed an awful big thing to accept the baby of her cousin. The soon to be daddy smiled. "Felt the baby kick this morning, then right after... Uh."

Jethro grinned. "Ain't a bit fair! You have all the luck."

"Nay, my friend, no luck to it. My Lanelle is a blessing from God. He give her to me, not luck."

"If that's how you want to see it." He retrieved his pocket watch. "Been eleven minutes. Didn't we rig up five minute fuses?"

Before his friend could say his usual 'we'll wait another ten', the powder exploded, sending bits of gravel and white smoke out the mine's entrance.

Moses rubbed his hands together. "Come on, partner, let's see what new riches the Lord blessed us with this time."

Jethro joined his friend. No doubt the gold was nice, but seemed to him the real treasure stayed down the mountain in her new cabin. He'd never seen his friend more at peace or happier.

Elijah brought the cart, and soon enough another ton of ore headed out for the hammer mill. After the first crushing, a bit of color caught Jethro's eye.

Picking up the nice size nugget, he hefted it in his palm. Perfect size for jewelry gold. She'd love it.

Then, in spite of all his promises not to let his Chinese love—to keep her out of his thoughts—Meiko stepped out of her silk-covered room, smiled at him, and waltzed across his heart, each dainty step ripping and tearing it anew.

How in the name of Moses' God could one female be so beautiful

and so cruel?

If you really are out there God, send me someone like Lanelle or at least help me forget that black-hearted woman.

Chapter Seven



“Mary? John around?”

“He's down at the docks seeing to our next shipment. Won't be back for a while. Something I can help you with, Mister Wingate?”

The man shook his head. “It's Caleb.” He stepped closer. The muscles in his jaws popped out a rhythm. Teeth clinching like he couldn't bear to let the words pass. “He's...”

She ran around the counter. “What? Tell me! Is he hurt?”

“Hate to say it, ma'am, he's dead.”

She grabbed her belly. “No, not my Caleb. He isn't. He's out scouting water. Be back today. He promised.” Turning away, she went to straightening the shelves behind the counter. It couldn't be true. He couldn't be dead.

“I'm so sorry to be the bearer of tragic news, Mary, but it's true. They took him to old man Brown's.”

Wheeling around, she put her hands on her hips. “Mister Wingate, this is not funny. Now really. Caleb's gone to find sweet water, that's all. You see? Whoever's been carried to Mister Brown's establishment is not my husband.”

The man stepped closer and rested his hand on her shoulder. “Mary, I'm happy to get my buggy, and we'll go find John for you. Want to go to the docks then?”

Her stomach churned, but not because of the baby. He'd be back. He promised. She shook her head. “No need to interrupt John's busy day. I mean just because some fool miner went and got himself killed. Caleb's coming home today.”

“Should I go get Mattie? You want her to come over?”

It had to be some horrible mistake. “I do appreciate the offer, and I'm sorry, but this can't be true. I'll lock up and let you take me to the undertaker and show you for sure and for certain that someone's made a terrible blunder here.”

“Fine then. I'll fetch my rig around to the front, ma'am.”

“I'll go get my bonnet and shawl, then I'll be right down. Thank you, Mister Wingate.” Upstairs, she also grabbed her purse and stowed her daddy's pistol in it, too. She locked up and waited out front for her neighbor.

This silly incident would make a good story to tell her babies one day. Caleb would get a big kick out of it. Yeah, that poor miner who could have been your father's twin got himself...

Big mistake.

How had Mister Wingate said the man died? Or had he?

He pulled up then ran round and helped her up.

Sitting ramrod straight, she looked ahead. "How did this man that looks like Caleb meet his demise?"

A palpable uneasiness fell over Mister Wingate, and he shook his head. "Let's make sure it's him first. You almost got me convinced it's all about a look-alike stranger."

What could it be? That disquiet she saw? "Why? What was this poor man doing?"

"Can't rightly tell you the what, but it's the where I didn't want to mention. You see, he was in the Golden Dragon."

"No, not my Caleb. He wouldn't be caught dead in that place."

A wave of nausea swept over her. He would never step foot in that awful den of iniquity. And why? He would have no reason. Not a happily married man with his first baby on the way. He was still out somewhere looking for sweet water.

She relaxed a bit. If they found their dead man at the Golden Dragon, then that convinced her all the more it couldn't be her Caleb. After being gone a week, he'd be in a rush to get home to her.

He would never have gone to Chinatown, much less that place.

The buggy rounded a corner. Four other members of the Vigilante Committee stood outside the undertaker's like they were waiting on Wingate--or her. Good, she could set them all straight, and they could be about finding the poor miner's folks.

Accepting the offered hand, she disembarked and marched up to old man Brown's place of business. The undertaker dressed in black with a string tie bow and top hat greeted her just outside his door.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Mis'ess Wheeler."

"There's no need to be, sir. There's an egregious error here. No reason to be consoling me." She went inside without waiting for him to respond or one of the other gentlemen to open the door. "Now where's this man you think is my Caleb?"

He ushered her into the back room. A man-sized lump covered by a white sheet lay on a table in the middle of the room. A lock of brown hair, exactly the color of his, showed under the white sheet.

Her heart skipped a beat.

No!

Plenty of men had brown hair, and if he looked like her husband, then what else could she expect?

Mister Brown eased around her, put his hand on the sheet, then

faced her. "I'm so sorry."

He pulled back the cover.

Her gasped startled even her. Tears filled her eyes. She batted them away, then leaned in and looked closer. It was him. Dear God, it was Caleb. "Oh, my darling husband, what have you gone and done?"

She recoiled. What had he done? Been found at the Golden Dragon?

Tentatively, she pulled the cover back off his feet. Right there they were. Those toes so different from any she'd seen. The flap of skin between his three middle toes grew up to the first knuckle on both feet. Just like his daddy and his daddy before him, Caleb had told her. And John had them, too, like all the Wheeler men.

She marched back outside and found Wingate huddled with the other committee members. "What was he doing in that place?"

Shrugging, her neighbor shook his head. "They said he'd been there three days, holed up with a uh...."

Her cheeks flashed red hot. "With what? Was he playing Faro?"

"No, ma'am. A bottle and a... Uh... Mis'ess, I'm not sure you should hear this in your condition."

The man to his right elbowed her neighbor. "Tell her, Virgil, best to hear it now than from some stranger."

"A whore, ma'am, the one calls herself the China Doll. He'd been with her. Barkeep said when he ran out of money, she and him went and sold your wagon and teams of mules. Then when that money was gone --"

"No!" Tears flowed. Someone screamed. Her head spun, and sobs wracked her from the core. Her knees buckled. Strong hands grabbed her arms and shoulders. White-hot searing pain cut into her heart. Then nothing.

A soft hand smoothed her hair.

"Poor, poor dear."

Good, her mother had come. She opened her eyes.

No, only Mis'ess Wingate. "I made some tea, sweetie. Would you like a cup?"

She sat up in bed. She couldn't be here. She had a business to run. Caleb would be furious with...

Oh, Lord, what had he done? How could it be?

What had she done?

Run off without her daddy's blessing just like her mother!

Dear God, I have become my mother.

Tears flowed anew. The pain in her heart dulled to a throbbing ache. A shroud of guilt covered her shoulders, weighed her down so.

Alone.

So far from home.

Could she bear it?

How had her mother stood it all those years ago? She needed her daddy, but he hated her, and she couldn't blame him. Worse, didn't want anyone in the family to have anything to do with her either.

Oh, Father in Heaven, what will I do?

Alone in San Francisco and about to deliver....

Her mama had been pregnant, too, with Rebecca. Tears fell anew.

Mis'ess Wingate sat on the bed next to her and stoked her hair. "I'm so sorry, dear Mary. Sweet darlin' girl. What can Virgil and I do to help you?"

The days piled on top of each other like corn in the crib until they stood so tall, she huddled in their shadow, unable to see the sun or feel its warmth on her face.

Work became her only solace. John tiptoed around as though it had been his fault Caleb got himself killed. So far, the miner who had ruined her life hadn't been caught.

The Vigilant Committee had sent flyers all over the state, with his name and description. A lot of good that would do her. Caleb dead and gone; lynching some guy wouldn't bring him back.

Even worse, Mister Wingate explained they couldn't close the Golden Dragon or the Palace or any of the other brothels.

The miners would riot and likely string up the committee.

A month to the day after Mary had buried her husband, the young man who worked with Moses and the mysterious Jethro Risen came for supplies.

John pulled him to the side. Probably telling him about Caleb. Then Elijah went to telling John something. Mary wanted to move closer, but that wouldn't be polite.

And really, what did it matter anyway?

A tear ran down her cheek. Her husband was dead, killed in a house of ill repute fighting over the notorious China Doll. How could she have been so wrong? Her chin fell to her chest, and she stared at her ever increasing girth.

Her belly grew bigger by the day. She stiffened her back and wiped the tear away. How could she cry for the likes of Caleb Wheeler?

But no matter how ridiculous, she still loved him. Why had he been there in that incorrigible place? What had driven him to that woman? She obviously was not a very good wife, or he never would have strayed.

While John loaded the supplies, Elijah paid the bill. Mary made small talk, hoping he wouldn't bring anything up. "You tell Lanelle to come see us."

"Yes, ma'am. She told me to give you and Mister John her love."

"Thank you, I appreciate the message." She reached over the

counter and touched his forearm. "Elijah, what is your surname?" He wrinkled his nose. "Your father's family name?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. It's Eversole. Elijah Eversole." He gave her a sad puppy dog look. "I'm sorry about your husband, ma'am. Miss Lanelle is going to hate hearing her cousin's gone."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"Ma'am, when you get ready, let me know, and I'll make you a good husband. I'd never go running off with another woman."

She nodded. "I'll keep that in mind. You take care now."

"Yes, ma'am."

Again, like her mother, doomed to be in love with an unworthy dead man—except Andrew Baylor hadn't got killed over a whore—still, every manjack drawing breath wanted to wed her.

How many stories had her mother told about the exact thing happening before she met Mary's father and fell in love on the Jefferson Trace.

Oh, to be home. She missed Texas.



John couldn't help but overhear Elijah's proposal. He would never just blurt out his feelings like that. He'd wait, let her finish mourning, then he'd ask her.

Partners already in the business, shared a name, no reason he could see not to share a bed. Even big and pregnant, she was so desirable. Smarter than a whip, yet naive and strong.

Back to work right after the funeral, the very day. John figured she needed a week or better off, but no, she wouldn't hear it. She insisted she had a business to run, said he did all the hard work.

But dealing with the customers, she shined. And how she kept all the costs in her head, he couldn't begin to comprehend. What an ace with numbers.

Hadn't made a bad deal yet, a queen of negotiating. If she wasn't getting the best, then she wasn't trading.

What was proper? If his idiot cousin hadn't got himself killed in a brothel fighting over a sporting lady, then maybe it'd have taken her a year or longer. But she had to hate Caleb, couldn't still be in love with the scalawag.

And how could she have missed what he and Lanelle had been up to? Or why she so eagerly married Moses Jones.

Each night, he wondered when and how he should broach the subject.

Be nice for the baby to have him listed as the father instead of Caleb, and what if she somehow found out he'd known about her

husband's trip to the mine? Would she hate him for not telling her about that?

One month and one day, long enough to wait. She seemed better. After he locked up, he took her down the street for a late supper. Once back inside, he lit an oil lamp and nodded toward the kitchen table. "Sit a spell, Mary, if you're not too tired."

She eased into her chair. "Not too bad, feet are a bit sore."

Sitting on the opposite side, he admired her beauty then cleared his throat. "I think we should..." His mouth went dry. That wasn't how he meant to start at all. The words hung in his throat. He was doing it all wrong. "Uh..." He swallowed. "We're already business partners and have the same name, and well, truth is, I love you, Mary Rachel. If you'll have me, will you be my wife?"

After studying a spot on the table too long, she looked up. He'd made a mistake. It was too soon. All there in her eyes. Shortly she shook her head and stood, grabbed the lantern, turned, then marched up her stairs without one word.

He wanted to run after her, convince her, and make her say yes. Why couldn't she understand it was the best way? But he didn't, he'd wait, let her mull it over. She hadn't said no. She only needed some time.

She'd see.

He'd give her a few days then ask again. But she needed to say yes before the baby came. He lit another lamp, climbed his stairs, and went to the room that had been his sister's. He poured himself a double then downed it in one gulp.

Wasn't as good as Caleb's last batch, but it had a nice kick. He refilled his glass and flopped down in his overstuffed chair. Time was on his side. He could wait her out, she'd see things his way.



Mary crawled into bed, curled up and wrapped her arms around her belly.

Oh dear Lord, what am I going to do?

John wasn't Caleb. About the only thing they had in common was a last name. The first time his cousin came courting Rebecca, Mary knew. John and her sister weren't a match, Rebecca said so, too, but gave him two more visits.

After all, he wasn't hard to look at. And her big sister had never wanted to dismiss a suitor at first blush.

Fine then, she'd sleep on it. He for sure would be better than some lovesick miner or Elijah. That fellow was so cute, but her father's words smacked her between the eyes. Tears welled, but she blinked

them back.

Oh, Daddy, why did you have to be right about Caleb? More boy than man after all, letting that harlot turn his head.

For the next week, any time it seemed John might bring up marriage, she shook her head and changed the subject. While she couldn't imagine running the Mercantile without him, would he stay once she told him her heart?

What would her daddy think about them living in the store together? Would the separate rooms count?

Why had she designed a shared kitchen and parlor? Sure seemed the thing to do at the time. Was there enough extra money to build a house on one of the lots? Maybe if he did the carpentry work, but sure would dent her reserves.

That night as she knelt beside her bed, she bowed her head.

Oh Lord, show me what to do, should I say yes for the baby's sake?

Chapter Eight



The days slipped by. Thankfully, her cousin-in-law didn't press Mary, but she had almost talked herself into saying yes. The baby, due in only a few weeks now, could have a living father.

If her Chinese midwife had it right, there'd be no way she could try to make it to Texas, even if she wanted to. She considered it, but dismissed the idea. Not with Daddy hating her for running off.

At eight that morning, the Mercantile's doorbell tinkled, announcing the first customer of the day. She looked up from her ledger. John stood with his hand out, about to greet the early shopper.

Good, she could finish yesterday's entries. Before she did though, her partner interrupted her calculations.

"Mary Rachel?"

Kind of nice, him using both of her names, reminded her of home. She stood and nodded toward her cousin and the man standing next to him. "Yes? How can I help?"

"Who's making leather water hose now? Remember? We found some for Moses and Jethro."

She closed her eyes and tried to picture the name on the bill. Yes! "Billy Mortenson, he's got a shop next to the slaughterhouse."

"That's right."

John took to giving the man directions, and she went back to her numbers. After only two new entries, a shadow fell over her desk. She looked up, the customer stood at the counter.

"Something else I can help you with, sir?"

"A man I knew in Texas talked some about his little sister named Mary Rachel."

She smiled. "That so, what was that man's name? I'm from Texas."

"Captain Baylor."

She stood. "You know Levi?"

"Yes, ma'am. Rode with him and Sergeant Rusk and a whole troupe of Rangers against Mexico. We couldn't have done it without them."

She laughed. "To hear Wallace Rusk tell it, he and Levi won that war all by themselves." The sound she'd made surprised her. Had it really been so long since she'd laughed?

The man chuckled then tipped his hat. "Edward Clinton, ma'am. Can you tell me, did your brother and Wallace do all the things Rusk claimed?"

She nodded. "I'm certain, and you probably haven't heard the half of it."

"Did they really ride into a Comanche war camp and rescue six women? One of them being your future sister-in-law?"

"Yes, sir, but then after the peace treaty didn't get ratified, Bold Eagle put a bounty out on his Red Rose." She pointed her pencil at the man. "While y'all were off running all over Mexico, a mixed band of Comanche and Comanchero came calling. Worse night of my life."

"How'd that turn out?"

"Daddy and Rose's son..." She shook her head. "My nephew Charley ended up shooting the last one, poor kid. He was only ten then."

The doorbell tinkled again. Mary greeted the lady then turned back to the man. "So good to meet you, sir, but –"

"Of course. I need to go see about that hose. Good day, Mis'ess..."

"Wheeler."

He nodded toward the back. "Tell your husband, I'll be back for my supplies after I see about the hose."

"Cousin by marriage, sir. John and my husband were cousins."

"Oh." He tipped his hat. "Were, as in you've been widowed?"

She gave him a slight nod and a little smile then rested her hand on her baby belly. Why hadn't she let Edward assume? "Afraid so."

After she finished with the lady and two others who needed her help, she answered her own question. Mister Clinton was cut from the same cloth as Levi and Wallace, maybe even a shade of her daddy's lofty weave.

How could she even think of marrying John when men like Edward Clinton walked the earth? It'd be nothing but wrong.

Oh Lord, am I a shameless hussy?

Then she spent much too much time swapping yarns with the man when he returned for his goods. That evening, after the last customer finally paid his bill and took his leave, she'd made up her mind for sure and for certain.

She faced her partner. "How about supper, any ideas?"

"There's a new diner over on Twelfth Street, want to try it?"

"You do know we could probably hire a cook for what we spend eating out." She leaned against the counter, suddenly too tired to walk the three blocks to Twelfth. She rubbed her tummy. "I best not go that far. Would you mind terribly bringing me something back?"

"No, not at all. Or we can go somewhere closer if you prefer."

She held her hand up. "No, you go on. I'll work on the books while

you're gone. Get today caught up. I want to stay on top of the ledger, knowing I'll be missing a few days soon."

He pulled the shades down, flipped the open sign, then locked the door behind him. Once she finished the day's entries, she waddled back to the kitchen. She slipped into her chair and lit the oil lamp.

Visiting with Edward had cemented what she already knew in her heart. She couldn't marry John. Her mother hadn't settled and ended up with her daddy. Well, she wasn't going to settle either. The devil could just take the hindmost.



John hated that he'd mentioned the Twelfth Street joint. Taking Mary to supper highlighted his day. He got his plate to go, too, then forced marched the three blocks back to the Mercantile.

He hated the way she had laughed with Clinton. It would be tonight. He'd force the issue and make her understand the importance of marrying him before the baby came.

Too many men out there like Captain Clinton. With Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk in Mexico! What a lie.

The man was some dandy from back east who'd read all about that war. The exploits of those two rangers were well known far and wide. Who hadn't heard about them? Wonder he and Mary Rachel didn't get around to Plum Creek.

And why'd he have to go and call her that anyway?

Once she was his misses, there'd be no strange men chatting with her, he'd make sure of that. Put a stop to it in the beginning. He came through the back door to find her at the table.

"There you are. Brought roast beef with all the trimmings. If the smell tells the tale, we're in for a treat."

Best roast he'd ever tasted, but she only picked at her meal. No wonder he couldn't imagine what it must be like so big and pregnant.

Hardly room for a good meal in there. Though the meat proved delicious, he found he couldn't eat much either in the silence.

A rock in his gut grew by the minute.

"Mary, I'm thinking we need to go ahead and get married. That baby isn't going to wait much longer."

She leaned back. "No, I don't believe so, John. I love you because you're family, but I can't marry you. It'd be wrong."

His cheeks blushed. His jaws clamped shut. The rock suddenly crashed into each fist. Somehow, he found words. "Why not?"

She shook her head.

"I'm twice the man Caleb was, and I love you, Mary. We're already partners. It's so logical. I swear I'll make you a good husband, and I'd

be faithful, you'd have no worries there."

She closed her eyes. Tears ran down her cheeks. "Please, John, let's agree to..." A sob escaped.

"What? You want to leave it like it is? How can we? It can't be. I couldn't stand every single man in San Francisco coming by to propose, or you laughing with them like you did with Captain Clinton today."

"Please, John."

He jumped to his feet. "I can't go on like this. I love you. Have since the first day you walked into my life on Caleb's arm. But if I can't have you, then well, we can't be in business together."

She opened her eyes and wiped her cheeks. "What are you saying? You want to buy me out?"

"No, ma'am. I love you too much to put you on the street. You buy me out, and I'll go North. The gold claims are playing out around here."

"But, John."

"San Francisco's liable to be just another ghost town in a year or two. The state's littered with them." He snorted. "If someone doesn't clear the harbor soon, you'll not be able to land any goods at all."

"What do you want for your half?"

Half. He'd been so stupid. He started the business and built it with his sweat and blood. He was the one around to buy the lots after the second fire, and it almost took every cent he had, too.

She waltzed in, and the next thing he knows, he's putting his name to a piece of paper that gave her and Caleb half his land, half his business, half of everything.

"Forty thousand."

"John, don't be ridiculous. Maybe the whole kit and caboodle is worth that, but right this minute, at close of business today, we have a little over three thousand dollars in the bank, and another seven either in stock or on the way that's paid for."

"Figure something out."

She shrugged. "I'll see if I can get a loan, but five thousand would be tops, and I'm not even sure of that."

"The land alone is worth that." Like always, if she wasn't getting the best end, then no deal. He wished he could hate her, but never could. He'd love his Mary until the day he died. "Ten, then, and I'll think on it."

"No, six is tops. And that's liable to bankrupt me. Ask around. See what it'd cost you could buy another business. Might show you that you're being entirely unreasonable. And you're the one wanting to leave. Remember that."

Being bankrupt might be nice, her crawling to him, bonnet in

hand, begging a second chance. Once the dust played out, that's exactly what would happen. "I'll sleep on it, but either way, I'm leaving."

She nodded. "That might be for the best. Can you give me a week?"

"A week it is, but either way, I'm gone in seven days, and I'll be taking half of whatever cash we have on hand. That's already mine. Remember that."



Jethro kept his own counsel while the other four talked. Appeared Elijah wanted John's share of the Mercantile powerful bad, or more likely, to be partnered with the lovely young widow.

But Jethro knew all about loving a woman who didn't love him, like having a sore finger that wouldn't heal. Yet he had to keep using his hand though it pained him at every turn.

Lanelle looked across the table. "What do you think, Mister Risen?"

Seemed maybe Mis'ess Jones had mixed emotions. In some strange way, she cared for the young lady, but dreaded being around her. Them both yearning for the same dead man must be hard all the way around.

But if Mary Wheeler was the business lady everyone claimed, he'd be a fool not to take this deal.

"Sounds like a sound investment. I say yes. What about you, partner?"

Moses closed his eyes, tilted his chin a bit, then after what must have been a confab with the Almighty, he smiled and faced Wheeler. "Want dust or nuggets?"

"Either or. Not picky."

A bit of dinner while the papers got signed and his gold weighed out, then Moses' brother-in-law couldn't get gone fast enough. Lanelle begged him hard to stay a few days, but the man wouldn't dream of burning any more daylight.

Claimed he had to be about finding a new location for himself and a new store far away from Wheeler and Wheeler Mercantile.

He'd probably go back to being Wheeler Dealer. What an idiot. But a broken-hearted man never made good decisions. Jethro knew that from personal experience.

Once the man's wagon rolled out of sight, he put his hand on Elijah's shoulder. "Fancy a trip to town?"

"Yes, sir."

"What about you two? Want to go with him?"

Moses wrapped his arm around Lanelle. "No, we've been thinking we'd go in and stay once she gets closer."

Elijah jumped off the porch then spun around, trying hard to sound serious. "If I go now, I can be there mid-morning tomorrow."

Jethro stifled a chuckle. Poor boy, willing to sleep under the stars to get there a few hours sooner. "Best get to it then. Come on Moses, let's help him hitch up the mules."



Mary took the cup of afternoon tea, set it on her desk, and smiled. "You're too good to me, Mis'ess Wingate."

"Darling, you have to call me Mattie."

"Yes, ma'am, I'll try to remember."

"Virgil back yet?"

"No, don't expect him for another hour or so."

The older woman leaned in. "That boy you two hired, I caught him leaning on his broom staring at you just now."

Mary shook her head. "Keep an eye on him for me. Mister Wingate said he worked hard yesterday."

"Mary, you are a God-send for us. Please, Virgil and Mattie. You're the boss. We work for you now. Bless the Lord, since we're living here with you, don't you agree we should all be on a first name basis?"

She smiled and nodded. "I'll try, I will, but truly, it's me who is blessed. You two are angels from Heaven above. I can't imagine what I'd do without you two, and this baby's liable to arrive most any day. I'm so at peace knowing the Lone Star Mercantile is in good hands."

Granted, arthritis had crippled the poor man's hands so that he could hardly hold a razor or a pair of scissors, but failed young miners meant strong backs aplenty in San Francisco, and Virgil had an easy manner with all.

He could have gone to work for a number of folks. Once the older lady retreated to the kitchen, Mary's daddy came to mind. He gathered good men, worked them hard, paid them better than anyone else, then made them family.

His methods had served him well.

She never knew he had such a stubborn, hateful mean streak. How could he be so cruel, to not even let her sisters write? Would he ever forgive her transgression?

Had she so injured his pride?

Chapter Nine



The old woman dropped the sheet and stood. "You dress now. I make tea."

"Yes, ma'am." Mary rolled off the hard table and got herself decent then joined the midwife in her parlor heavily draped with red satin.

The worst part of every visit proved to be drinking Miss Ling's bitter tea. After she drained her cup and slipped a silver dollar under the saucer, she smiled. "How much longer do you think it'll be?"

"One week, two..." The old woman smiled. "Baby good, she come when ready."

"A girl, you sure?"

Miss Ling lifted bony shoulders. "Maybe."

Virgil met her at the door on the way out and helped her into the wagon. "Everything fine, Miss Mary?"

"She says another week or two."

"Oh." He glanced at her belly, shook his head, then tapped the mules with the leather harness.

She leaned against the seat's short backrest and wrapped both arms around her belly. A girl. Oh, she hoped that was true. Susannah Ruth Wheeler had such a nice ring to it. If only her mama could be here.

Or any of them. She couldn't believe her daddy turned out to be such a stubborn man. Pride goes before a fall, and he knew that perfectly well. Bible said it plain as day. She would never have thought he'd hold such a grudge against her.

Virgil stopped at the front door, helped her down, then took the rig to the livery.

Just inside the Mercantile's front door, Elijah waited, holding a bouquet of daisies and lacy ferns. The young man looked so cute standing there. His apparent nervousness might cause him to bolt any second if he didn't wet his britches.

Poor guy.

He extended the flowers. "Jethro Risen said ladies liked pretty things. When I saw these on the way this morning..." He smiled. "They ain't near as beautiful as you, but I thought you might like them."

Mary accepted his offering, but didn't really know what to say. She never wanted to hurt him and hadn't done anything to lead him on. She'd been careful of that. "Why thank you, Elijah. They're lovely, and that's so thoughtful of you."

Mattie hurried in, holding a vase. "Here, Mary, let me take those." She smiled at him. "Want them on your desk?"

"Sure, that'll be fine, and thank you." She turned back to him. "Got a list for us? Virgil will be back shortly. If you don't mind, I'll let him help you."

He nodded, then his expression changed from bashful suitor to... What was it she saw there?

"Mary, I've got good news. At least I hope you'll think it is." He puffed his chest then held out a piece of paper. "We're partners now."

"What are you saying, we're partners?" She took the paper and read it over.

"Yes, ma'am. John Wheeler came by yesterday, and we all decided to buy him out. Used the mine's gold, so I'm like...uh, a ten percent owner now." He pointed toward the paper. "I think ten's right."

"Let me see."

"It's all right there. Jethro said for me to give you back the fifteen hundred you gave John 'fore he left. Didn't want you to be short of cash."

She and her cousin had shook on it. She had the option to buy John's share. Nothing was right about this—the way he handled it. "What did he charge you?"

"Ten grand, less the fifteen hundred. Moses said if you want, we'll keep the extra, and you can have a bigger cut, but either way, you're still the boss."

"Anything else?"

"Well, Miss Lanelle says if it's fine with you, her and Moses would like to come stay when her time gets closer."

"Of course, we'll make a place for her. Any idea when?"

"No, ma'am. She ain't...uh...sorry, isn't..." He glanced at her tummy then studied on the floor.

"What is it, Elijah?"

"Well, ma'am, she's not as..."

She grinned and patted his shoulder. "I see. Not as big? Is that the word you're hunting?"

"Uh, yes, ma'am, sorry. I mean, she's...uh, in the motherly way and all, but..." He held his hands out from his own stomach. "About to here."

Looked to Mary maybe six months along, but how could that be? She and Moses were only married.... When? She thought back. Mercy, had it been that long? No, she was rightly sure not, but then what did

the man know about anything?

She read through the contract again, more slowly this time. Simple enough; she handed it back. "I'll take the cash, and we'll be fifty-fifty, but I want the part about me being the boss in writing."

"Yes, ma'am. Mister Risen thought you might. Said for me to sign for our side, then file it all with the claims clerk, like it were a mine."

Worked for her. Having the gold back was heaven sent. She'd been losing sleep over how to scrape up enough money to pay for her next shipment. Stupid bankers wanted a piece of the business plus interest before they'd give her any money.

At least John had sold his share to kin. Lanelle wouldn't let them cheat her, would she?

Oh, Daddy, why couldn't it be you? She'd love being his partner.

"You best write it out exactly like you want it. My spelling ain't the best. You go ahead, then I'll just sign."

His words pulled her back from Texas. "Of course, Elijah." She waddled to her desk and retrieved a new piece of paper.

"Want to go with me?"

She held her quill up and looked at him, his demure suitor face back in place. "What?"

"The clerk's office. Want to go with me? We could stop somewhere after and get us a nice dinner. You know, to celebrate us being partners."

"Thank you, but no, I best stay here."

Obviously crestfallen, he stiffened his upper lip as the Brits claimed they did and smiled. "Can I bring you something when I come back for our supplies?"

She should tell him no, but couldn't bring herself to be downright mean. She'd have to find another way to get through to Elijah that she was done with suitors more boy than man. "That would be nice, but something light. I can't eat a lot."

Oh, Daddy, why did you have to be right?

"Yes, ma'am. I can see why." Poor thing, his face reddened.

"It's all right, Elijah. I know what you meant. It's almost time for my baby to be born. She's about as big as she's got room to grow, don't you think?"

He circled the brim of his hat, skittish as a cornered coon. "Yes, ma'am, I'd say so." He stuffed his hat on his head and took off.

She couldn't help laughing, but stifled her giggles until he was out the door. Thank goodness for that.

Eight days later, on a rainy October day, little Susannah decided she wanted out, and what started as the worst day of Mary's life, turned into the best. The pain's memory vanished with one look at her baby girl.

It broke her heart Caleb would never see his daughter, especially after claiming he loved children and wanted a houseful.

How had that woman snared him in her trap? Three days, they said he'd been there....

Little Susannah whimpered, and all thoughts of her dead husband vanished. A part of him, the best part, lived on in his baby. Mary would tell her all of the good and keep the bad buried.

Tomorrow or the next, she'd write again. Forget Henry Buckmeyer. She penned her missive to her sisters, addressed to Rebecca alone.

They'd all want to know about Susannah Ruth. Wouldn't do for Rebecca or any of the others to name a baby after their mother, and her older sister would surely be proud to share a middle name with her new niece.

Sooner or later, she'd have it out with her daddy and... And what? Make him forgive her for running off?

Had anyone come calling on Gwendolyn? Mercy, she'd be sixteen now, plenty old enough if some hairy-legged galoot—as Mama May called the male of the human species.

The poor young man would have to have guts enough to get past her daddy and the rangers. She had to give Caleb that, he'd had guts.

The Golden Dragon and its China Doll often haunted her dreams. She guessed she'd never know the whole truth, but chose to believe her husband had been way more good than bad, and just suffered from one bad decision that cost him his life.



That night in the cabin, now shared with his young partner, Jethro lay in his bunk listening to the boy sleep like the baby he was. The fellow's way with machines amazed him more every day.

Turning Jethro's drawings into the real deal that worked even better than he'd planned, yet so downright dumb in so many other areas.

Almost made him want to go see the young woman for himself. To hear the boy and Moses tell it, Mary Wheeler was about the prettiest female that ever graced the streets of San Francisco. No way the Texas lady's matched Meiko's beauty.

Hopefully, Mary lacked the black streak running through the woman's heart.

Although it seemed she was doing everything she could not to hurt the boy, but maybe that was her game. Lead him along then drop the anvil on his heart, get him to sell her his share of the mine and store to her for a little of nothing.

Was she that cruel?

Did she know the whole truth about her worthless husband? About him and Lanelle?

Hell hath no fury, wasn't that what the Bard claimed? Or was that some other dead guy? Or a scripture Moses read him? He hated English Literature, hated school period, except for engineering.

Go back east, that's what he should do. Patent some of his inventions, but that wouldn't do. Meiko was here, and while he couldn't stand being in the same town, for a fact, he couldn't bear the thought of going any farther away from her.

One day...

Then as if his heart hated him, he slipped back into her mother's red satin-draped parlor, sipping that horrible tea the old lady swore by.

Each night for a week, he dreamed of those days with the oriental beauty, relived them in the greatest of detail, then inevitably, he'd jumped to that last night. He'd followed her, but just as he pushed her door open, his eyes rebelled.

He bolted upright in bed.

As most mornings after breakfast and necessities, Moses caught up with him as he climbed toward the mine. His partner bumped his shoulder. "Our new partner said you been hollering and carrying on in your sleep again."

"Elijah talks too much."

"The Bible says the truth will set you free."

"Don't start. I'm not going to see her."

"Well, Lanelle wants to go to town sometime in the next few days. She's thinking maybe she's got another month or so, but isn't sure."

Jethro bit his tongue. Lanelle had been about the best thing ever happened to his friend, and the man didn't need any snide remarks from him.

Still he couldn't help but think it odd that his friend's wife couldn't remember exactly when she slept with her cousin. Seemed like it must have been a pretty regular thing if she had no idea when they made the baby.

"So you're figuring to be gone a month or more? Let Elijah know a day in advance when you want to go. Don't want him forgetting anything for his list."

"We could shut the mine down, and all of us take a holiday. Lord knows we sure could stand some lazy days, waiting for my baby to get here."

"And what would we come back to, a bunch of claim jumpers robbing us blind."

Moses shot him a smirk, then picked up a powder keg and balanced it on his shoulder. "You ready?"

Not really, but working the mine gave Jethro some respite. Couldn't daydream about her and do his job, leastwise not most of the time.

However, Meiko refused to be denied that day. After too many to count hammer blows, he laid out the first fuse line, and she stayed close, looking over his shoulder, then followed right behind Moses as the big oaf got himself to safety.

He lit the line of black powder and hurried outside. He eased to the ground and closed his eyes. There, just out of his reach, she smiled at him, same as she had for those three weeks. Why couldn't he get that black-hearted woman out of his soul?

He extracted his pocket watch and studied the spinning little half-wheel marking the second's fractions, held the brand new gold timepiece out. "It's been five minutes."

"We'll give it another ten."

Keeping a close eye on the wheel provided a bit of relief; the whirling, pause, back and forth the little piece of gold spun, marking the splits. He loved clocks and watches and any other mechanical means of measuring time.

Once thought he'd spend his life building them, seeing how close he could get to perfection, but wasn't to be. He needed physical labor and hated sitting a workbench all day.

Checking the time again, he held the watch out. "Been another ten." He stood. "I'll go relight it."

Moses jumped in front of him. "I'll go."

"No, sir. You're a married man now. It's a dud. I twisted the fuse, and I'll go fix it."

"Jethro Risen, you're a heathen. If—God forbid—it did go off unexpected like, then you'd roast in hell's fire for all of eternity. Couldn't live with that on my shoulders. Me, on the other hand, I know exactly where I'm going when I leave this world."

Jethro stared at his friend: seemed his partner had used this I'm-saved-you're-going-to-hell excuse every time the powder didn't blow. "We'll give it another ten minutes."

Moses patted his shoulder. "If it was going to blow, it would have by now." He smiled then strolled into the mine.

Like hell's demons had waited for that exact second, the ground trembled and pitched. The powder exploded, spewing dust and gravel out the opening.

Jethro rushed in. The smoke choked him.

He dropped to his knees, pulled his shirt up, and breathed through the cloth.

He found Moses lying flat out on his back, covered in blood and sparkling pieces of crystal and gold nuggets, not twenty feet up the

main shaft.

Chapter Ten



“Someday you’ll understand.”

Her mother’s words filled her heart. Now she understood exactly, though before having her own, she could never have realized how very much love a mother could have for her daughter. She tickled little Susannah’s cheek.

Her baby girl sucked one more little drink then stopped. Mary smiled and snuggled her in tight, then closed her own eyes.

Did her mama know about her little namesake? Bible mentioned a great cloud of witnesses; would one of them pass on the news? Maybe Sue Abbott Baylor made that group. Or would the Lord himself let her know?

Dozing off, she hoped it might be true, but either way, one fine day, she’d be reunited with her sweet mama. And Susannah would meet her, too. What a wonderful plan for reconciliation God had created for humankind.

Miss-Mattie-sized footfalls echoed from the stairs and mixed into her dream before a light tap on her door opened one eye. The old dear stuck her gray head in, illuminated by the oil lamp she carried.

“Mary, are you awake, dear? Jethro Risen is here. He says he needs your help.”

She scooted up in bed. The mystery man himself needed her help? “Why? What could be wrong?”

“A terrible accident, it seems, but it’s Lanelle’s baby boy.”

“We’ll be right down.”

Housecoat thrown over her gown, then her shawl over that, she scurried downstairs. Her cousin had a boy? How could it be the baby already came? She hadn’t been married long enough yet. Had the baby come early?

She joined the confab in the parlor. Mattie held her arms out, and Mary handed her baby Susannah then faced Mister Risen. “What’s this with Lanelle’s baby? Is something wrong with him? How can I help?”

“Guess her milk isn’t right. Miss Ling suggested maybe you could come and sent me to fetch you.”

“Of course.” But why would Lanelle be at the midwife’s? Why hadn’t she come here? “Mis’ess Wingate mentioned an accident?”

What's happened?"

Mattie touched her arm. "I've got the baby, dear, and Virgil can run the store just fine. Do you want to run up and get ready?"

She focused. "Yes, certainly. The baby just ate, and yes..." She faced Risen. "Give me a minute to dress proper. Virgil, could you fetch our wagon?"

"No need, ma'am. I've got ours outside." Jethro looked so troubled.

Just as the town was coming to life, the not so mysterious man reined his mules toward Chinatown. "Thank you, ma'am, for coming."

"What else would you expect, sir? That's what family does, helps each other. Isn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

With John gone off to who knew where, Lanelle was the only kin she had this side of Texas. "So what about the accident? What's happened?"

"It's Moses Jones. He...he, uh...well, we thought a fuse was a dud. But just as he got inside the mine to relight it, the ground shook, and it went off. He's in bad shape. And well, then Lanelle went into labor."

"Oh, no, dear Lord. Poor Lanelle."

"We had to make her leave him long enough to birth the baby, but Miss Ling says it soured her milk. Poor little guy, he doesn't look good."

"Oh, Father have mercy. I am so sorry. When did all this happen?"

"Been four days now."

"When was the baby born?"

"Yesterday morning."

What was wrong with everyone?

She was family.

Someone should have fetched her way before now. Well, none of that mattered right this minute. She had plenty of milk, and baby boy wouldn't be hungry much longer. "What's his name?"

"Hasn't got one yet. Lanelle can't seem to think of anything but her husband. Blames herself, says it's all her fault."

"Well, my goodness, why in the world would she do that? Did she have something to do with the fuse?"

"No. Wasn't even with us." He glanced over, shook his head and rode the rest of the way in silence.

Once there, he helped her down, opened Miss Ling's front door, then excused himself. The old midwife split the bead curtain separating her front room from the rest of her house.

"Ah, Mary, good girl. You here now. Feed this baby boy."



Jethro closed the stall's door, pitched some hay in then hurried out. Elijah hadn't lied. The stunning Mary Wheeler was about the prettiest young lady he'd ever laid eyes on. She radiated a wholesomeness that multiplied her beauty. No wonder men and boys alike were smitten.

From what he'd heard, she received better than a marriage proposal a week.

How in Moses' God's name had Caleb Wheeler motivated the young lady to walk the aisle? Didn't she have a father or mother? Anyone who could see through the scoundrel's sweet-talking lies?

He slipped in Miss Ling's side door and walked to Moses' room. The incense the old woman burned couldn't hide the smell of death that hung heavy. It almost knocked him back after being free from it and breathing fresh air.

If only there was something he could do.

Oh, Moses, dear friend.

Lanelle slept in the chair on the far side of his bed. Should be him lying there, but then if it had been, he'd probably be dead, and what? Roasting in hell's fire according to the big man. A shiver started at his neck and raced down his spine.

Could there be such a place as hell? Or a heaven? Moses was convinced of it, but that didn't make it so. To hear his old man tell it, religion was for the weak minded, but....

Lanelle raised her gaze. "Jethro."

"I brought Mary. She's here to feed the baby."

"Oh." She looked past him then back. "Where exactly?"

"I'm not sure, I came in the side –"

"Oh." She shook her head. "Please, don't let her see his feet."

What an odd thing to say. He nodded, but had no clue what she might mean by all that. Had Lanelle lost her senses?

"I got a sip of water down him last night."

He smiled; she must not remember he'd been there helping her, or that Moses choked on it. What was he going to do? Darkness pressed his heart, but he had nowhere to turn. "Ready for some coffee? Or something to eat?"

"No, go on if you want some. I'll be right here." She stood over Moses and mopped his brow with a damp cloth. "Tell Mary I'm grateful, please."

"Of course."

He slipped back out. Miss Ling didn't drink anything, but that horrible tea. He snuck off down the street and bought a bag of sweet cakes and a big jug of coffee. Idiot man charged him double, but what good was his gold anyway without Moses?

It all meant nothing if his partner wasn't around to share it.

Maybe Lanelle might eat a cake. He looked in on her first, but she still didn't want anything. After watching the big man struggle for a few labored breaths, he went looking for Mary. Found her and the baby in the parlor.

Poor tiny guy slept in her arms all wrapped in a soft blanket. Why did women truss up their little ones so like a cocoon? He'd hate it, but then he didn't know anything about children or their care.

"I got coffee and sweet cakes and –"

"Oh, bless you. I'd love some of it all. I take my coffee with cream, but black's fine if there isn't any. "

Shortly he returned with one of Miss Ling's little tea cups full of milky coffee and a plate loaded with the sweets. She held the baby out, and he didn't know what to do but accept the little booger.

Such a tiny face. He blew out soft contented puffs, finally got his little belly full. He rested the precious new life against his chest. She sipped the coffee and nibbled on a muffin.

"Thank you so much. Nursing, I get so thirsty and hungry."

He smiled, the door popped opened, and the devil herself walked in.

"Jet, I was just now thinking –" Meiko stopped midsentence and stared.

Her gaze left him, moved to the baby at his chest, then to Mary. Her eyes spit daggers. She turned back to him, opened her mouth, but didn't say another word. Just turned and marched out, slamming the door behind her.

Took all he could muster to not run after her, but he'd sworn to himself.

And what just happened? What had he just seen?



Mary couldn't believe her eyes. What was the China Doll doing here at Miss Ling's and...? She swung around and faced Mister Risen. "I take it you two know each other?"

He nodded.

She set the cup down, dusted her fingers, and stiffened her back. "Would you please take me home before that woman comes back?"

"Of course." He handed her the baby and stood. "I'll fetch the wagon, shouldn't take long. I left them harnessed."

Against his protest, she'd insisted Virgil take her to that din of iniquity so she could see the China Doll. They were right, she should have left well enough alone. Wasn't her fault Caleb found her irresistible.

But worst of all, now the dark-haired harlot haunted her dreams.

Shamed Mary to think he'd choose the whore over her. Just because she wasn't as good looking or....

She hated it all to blue blazes. Why had her daddy been so right? If she'd fallen in love with a real man, someone like Edward Clinton, then she wouldn't be sitting there fuming over seeing Caleb's precious China Doll.

Halfway back to the Mercantile, the question she'd been wanting to ask slipped out. Why was she so stupid?

"I met Meiko when Moses broke his leg last year. That was before y'all came."

"Her real name is Meiko?"

"That's right, Meiko Ling."

"She's Miss Ling's daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"She called you Jet?"

He filled his lungs. "What is it about you, Mary Wheeler? I haven't been able to talk about her, but with you...." He shrugged. "Moses said...." His words tailed off like now it was his friend he couldn't bear talking about.

"Miss Ling said he could wake up any minute."

He nodded, a tear trickled down his cheek.

"I'll be praying for him. You a praying man, Mister Risen?"

He shook his head.

"That's a shame. I don't know how folks make it through a day here in this hateful land without the hope of God."

"Moses agrees with you." He smiled.

"Stop." She rotated on the bench toward him.

He reined the mules in. "What is it?"

"Turn around, we need to get the baby. I don't want to have to come back all the time to feed him there. Plus, I didn't even speak to my cousin. Guess seeing the China...." She reseated herself facing front.

He maneuvered the team around.

"I'll speak with Lanelle. You can bring her to the Mercantile whenever she wants, but I'll see to the baby boy at my place while she tends to Moses."



Lanelle heard the front door's tinkling bell. Another poor soul needing the healer to work them a miracle, but the old lady seemed fresh out. She hadn't even given poor Moses anything to ease his pain because she wanted him to wake up.

Maybe him being out of it was actually a God-send. Broken bones she understood, but his head injuries, him not waking up broke her

heart.

First, she'd been responsible for Caleb's death, and now her sweet husband's life hung in the balance. Had her love truly been so evil? How could God be so cruel to claim both their lives just because she'd fallen in love with a cousin?

Miss Ling said Moses hovered between heaven and earth, and that he had to decide where he wanted to be.

She pressed her cheek to his and whispered in his ear. "Please come back to me, dear husband. Moses Jones, please choose me and come back. Help me raise our new baby boy. I can't do it without you." She broke down and sobbed on his chest.

How could it be that he might not? He couldn't choose heaven over her.

He was so excited about the baby coming soon. The baby. Marked with those stupid Wheeler toes exactly like every man in the family. What was she going to do? Mary would probably see sooner or later and know for sure.

If she had it, she'd swill enough rot gut to make it all go away, for an afternoon anyway. The jug still waited in the spring. But what would it help? The morning after always came.

Oh, Lord! Are my sins so great? Does Moses have to pay, too? Take me! Or the baby—both of us, but don't let Moses die. Please, Lord, give him back to me.

A hand rested lightly on her shoulder. "Lanelle?" The voice sounded way sweeter than she ever deserved. "I'm so sorry about Moses."

She looked up. "Mary. Thank you. And for feeding the baby. Miss Ling said he's already better and will thrive with your milk now."

"Oh, I'm glad to. How's Moses? Any change?"

She shook her head.

"Anything I can do?"

Though her eyes pleaded, she couldn't put a voice to what she really wanted. "Pray."

"Listen, I'm going to take the baby with me to the Mercantile. I've got Susannah and can't be coming back all the time. Mister Risen said he'd bring you whenever you want."

The no died halfway across her tongue. "Oh, Mary, you don't have to do that. It's too much. We can find a wet nurse. You've got your own baby to see to. Did you bring her? Miss Ling told me you'd named her after your mother."

"I'm family. It's no problem, believe me. I've got plenty of milk for the both of them, and we don't want some stranger tending to our little man. Have you got a name for him yet?"

She closed her eyes. Moses wanted to give him his name, but how

could she? She offered a smile, hopeful her heart didn't show. "We hadn't settled on anything yet. I read the story of Moses in the Bible, thought about Aaron. Or Joshua took over for him after he died, but that can't...."

She looked up, but tears blurred sweet Mary. "I just don't know. He can wait until his daddy is better." Her cousin backed away a step, eyes glistening with tears of her own. "Oh Mary, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean... I'd never hurt you on purpose."

Her cousin wiped her eyes. "No, don't you be sorry on my account. I don't want you to become a widow, it's a horrible fate. No ma'am. You take care of your Moses, and I'll watch baby Jones. I'll take good care of him for you."

She gritted her teeth, but the words didn't come.

How could she hurt sweet Mary?

Oh, Lord, don't let her figure it out.

Chapter Eleven



The next feeding proved a bit awkward, but Mary managed. Bless Mattie's heart. She sure seemed to like playing grandmother. And Virgil, the poor old dear, had a dozen customers with twice that many questions every time she retreated from her desk to the parlor.

After only two days, Jonesy must have gained a full pound, maybe more. Even though he started smaller and was birthed two full weeks after her Susannah, a body would never know they weren't twins. More than one customer had asked.

"Cousins."

That's all she allowed, no one needed to know Moses still clung to life, but was fading fast. Mister Risen had fetched the boy once, said Lanelle couldn't bare leaving Moses but wanted to see him.

Then he came the next day to bring news and tell Mary maybe it would be best to just leave Jonesy with her for a little longer. Miss Ling gave them no hope. But Lanelle declined to believe the old woman's declarations.

The healer woman kept telling her that with Moses so busted up, it was a wonder he'd lasted as long as he had. His wife, though, refused to leave his side and continually read the scriptures over the man, with times of begging him to choose her, to choose to stay, as if the man had any choice.

Mary hated the sorrow and pain in Risen's voice with the telling. So obvious he loved his friend. Whose heart wouldn't go out to the young woman, or the man?

Mid-morning of the third day of her having Jonesy, Mattie put big pots of water on and insisted everyone, including Mary, get themselves a nice hot bath. Resisting, she retreated to her paper work, but her employee wouldn't relent.

"Now, dear heart, cleanliness is next to Godliness."

"You do know that is not in the Bible." Mary glanced up from her ledger.

The old dear put her hands on her hips and stared across the desk. "Sweet girl, come on now, you're first, then I'll bathe the babies, me and Virgil can get wet during their afternoon nap time. That way, someone will always be minding the store. You know it will make you

feel better, a hot bath always does.”

“You’re going to stand there begging until I agree, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Unpinning her hair, she laid back against the wash tub and let the hot water pull all the trials and tribulations of her bad choices not only out of her muscles, but out of her soul. She closed her eyes and prayed blessings over her dear Mattie.

No one had mentioned her birthday, but she’d turned eighteen all the same.

The tub wasn’t her daddy’s fancy bath house, but welcomed. After the old dear rinsed the soap out of Mary’s hair, her turn ended. She stood and wrapped in her cotton robe Mattie had left for her.

Mary sighed, it felt wonderful to be clean. She helped with Susannah’s bath, then her resident angel went to bathing the boy.

Covering her daughter with the soft nursing blanket, she helped her to latch on, then rocked and sang to her. Mattie dipped little Jonesy into the warm water. By the time her sweet baby girl slept soundly, the woman brought her the boy and took Susannah.

“I’ll go put her in the cradle.” Shortly she returned.

Mary smiled. “Do you know what a blessing you are?”

“Who me?” The woman scurried around straightening the area. “Have you noticed that baby boy’s toes? I’ve never seen such.”

Mary uncovered his tiny feet. “Oh, yes. I mean I hadn’t, but that’s a Wheeler trait, only the men carry it. I imagine Lanelle was proud for that.” She smiled and rocked the boy she suckled. Caleb’s words came back to her. Father to son...

She closed her eyes and focused to recall his exact words that first time she’d asked about his extra skin. Father to son, he’d said. The daughters didn’t have it or pass it on. But then...

Her heart flipped then threatened to beat out her chest.

Oh, Father God.

Was that why Lanelle came? Why she married Moses Jones in such a rush? Her heart slowed.

Was it still beating at all?

Warmth drained from her face, and hot tears pooled in her eyes. She did her best to remain nonchalant, but...

What was Mattie saying?

What a fool she’d been! A blind, stupid fool!

And here she was, being a... No. This innocent baby had done nothing but be born; he didn’t pick his daddy or partake in his mother’s sins! Except the poor little thing was reaping what they had sown.

Sins of the fathers visited on the children up to the fourth generation. That’s what the Word said.

Dear Lord, dear Lord.

“Mary? What’s wrong dear? You’re white as a sheet.”

She stiffened her lip and smiled. She went to speak, but the words wouldn’t come. She cleared her throat and tried again. “No, ma’am, we’re fine. Just reminiscing a bit I guess. Wishing things had been different.”

She kept her smile, and her awful secret. She hadn’t lied.

“It’s a shame you came all the way to California to be such a young widow, and single mother, having the baby to raise alone. And now looks like your cousin may suffer the same fate. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

“I should have listened to my father.”

“If only we could see into the future, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. If only.” Caleb’s son at her breast. She wrapped his feet.

The only one who knew the truth was poor Lanelle.

Oh, dear God, it all made sense now.

That rotten Caleb Wheeler had bamboozled her, too.



Jethro couldn’t stand watching his friend die before his eyes. He backed out of the room and slipped out the back door. For the longest he wandered the streets, searching for... Who knew for what?

He’d convinced Moses Jones to come west, promised him adventure, but not death. His friend caught the fever, but claimed God told him he’d be rich. Well, he had the adventure and more gold than he’d ever need.

Found himself a wife he loved more than his next breath...

But where was his God in all this?

No one could call the big galoot weak minded, but for as long as Jethro had known the man, he’d not only talked about his religion, he’d lived it, walked it out. One of the big reasons Jethro had first been attracted to him.

His own father and all his kind traded in lies and deceit, worshiped at the altar of greed. How many times had his pa told him that he named him Jethro because it meant large. It tickled Moses that the original Moses’ father-in- law was Jethro.

Seemed silly at the time, the giant giggling like a little girl, but...

COME UNTO ME

“What?” Jethro looked left then right. He spun around. No one, but when he turned back, he stood in front of an old store someone had converted to a church. Like a siren calling to his heart, the place drew him.

A single candle burned inside. But it wasn't Sunday. He turned away, but his feet brought him back.

Maybe there was a God.

What would it hurt to give the priest a few coins?

Talk to the Almighty, if there was such a person, about his friend.

He walked in.

No resemblance to the gold encrusted one he'd visited in New York.

His schoolmate's bride insisted they be married in a church, so Jethro had gone, though he didn't understand half of what the priest said, since he'd dropped Latin after the third class. He looked around at the raw board walls and benches.

One big room, the place empty. Just an old store; someone put up a church sign.

Who lit the candle?

"May I help you, son?" An old man sat on the bench behind him to the right. Where'd he come from? He stood and walked toward him, bent with age, dressed like an undertaker, except he didn't have the morbid look most morticians wore. His face glowed in the candle's light.

"Uh, the priest around? Wanted to pay him to pray for my friend."

"I'm the preacher here; the Catholic Church is downtown."

"Oh, what are you then?"

"Methodist. What's wrong with your friend?"

"Got caught in a mine explosion, busted ribs, broken arm, the worst part, he isn't waking up, not eating, barely drinking anything. He's wasting away." Why tell this stranger about Moses? He didn't know his partner or care, just another miner got himself blown up.

Jethro fished out a Half Eagle and held it on his extended palm. "Tell God I'd like my friend back. I'll pay."

"God doesn't need your money, son." The old man pushed Jethro's open hand away. "His healing is not for sale. Put your money away. What's your friend's name?"

"Moses."

The preacher gasped. "Are you Jethro Risen?"

A chill grabbed his arms. Goose bumps popped up then were gone just as fast. Lot of folks knew that he and Moses were partners. "What of it?"

"I married Moses and Lanelle. He asked me to pray for you. You say he got caught in an explosion? Was Elijah hurt?"

How did he know the young man, and why hadn't anyone mentioned the preacher? "No, sir. He was tending the hammer mill."

"Where is Moses?"

"Miss Ling's."

He nodded. "That's good. Was going to suggest her if you'd taken him to one of our sawbones." The man extended his hand. "Pray with me, Jethro."

Hadn't held hands with another man other than to shake since his mother's funeral. How long had that been? But he did as told, then let the old boy pull him to a little bench in the back of the room.

He knelt down, and Jethro didn't see any way not to follow suit. Didn't mind. He'd crawl naked over a mile of tailings if it got him Moses back.

"Our Father, Who art in Heaven..."

Jethro knew this one. Moses had recited it so many times. He joined in and got it right, word for word. Then the guy started over and talked off on his own, making it up as he went.

"Our Father, we bless you. We come before Your throne now asking for our brother's life."

The more the old preacher prayed, the better Jethro liked him. This guy knew his stuff, and best of all, not one Latin word came out of his mouth.

The guy pushed back from the bench and pressed his head to the floor, and went to talking under his breath. Jethro tried to listen but couldn't make out what he was saying.

He looked to the ceiling.

Was there really a loving Father up there somewhere?

Had He sent His only Son like Moses claimed?

COME UNTO ME ALL WHO ARE WEARY AND HEAVY LADEN
AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST

"What'd you say?"

The guy raised up off the floor shrugged then put his head back on the floor boards.

How long had it been since he'd slept? Dozed some yesterday. That had to be it, except he wasn't a bit tired. Energized, really. That voice. Didn't sound a bit like the old man.

FOR I SO LOVED THE WORLD

"That You gave Your only begotten Son?" Jethro repeated the verse Moses quoted so many times. "That whosoever... I'm a whosoever, but it's Moses needs to be saved."

HE IS MINE ALREADY

For a few heartbeats, Jethro's soul hung in the balance, but he knew what he had to do. Moses had told him plenty of times. If not in this life, he'd be reunited with his friend in the next. "I'm a sinner, save me, Lord."



Seemed to Lanelle that his breathing came easier. Maybe his

cracked ribs had healed some. She wiped his brow, then kissed his cheek. "Moses Jones, you've got to live. Can you hear me? I can't go on without you. Please! Come back to me."

He gasped then held his breath all together like the part of him that still felt couldn't stand letting it out.

"Breathe, baby. Please don't stop breathing."

He exhaled real slow, the air barely coming out. But then inhaled again, shallow this time, like that same part insisted no deep breathing.

She put her ear to his chest like Miss Ling. His heart thumped, but nowhere near as loud as the last time she listened. Was he dying? A rage rose and burned her cheeks. She didn't love Caleb. She knew that now, grieved more over his leaving her than hearing of his passing. Idiot. Getting himself killed over a harlot.

Mary would hate her once she figured it all out. Couldn't stand it that she wouldn't run off with him, first pretty face came along turned his fool head. Men and their silly pride. Poor girl.

She should have told her in Jefferson before she married the idiot, but she believed his lies. He was going to get rich and...

"Wake up, Moses, we have business to tend."

She kissed him square on the lips then put her mouth close to his ear. "I know you told me not to, but I am. I want you to know, so hear me well, I love you, Moses Jones. You. It's you I love you so much it hurts all the way to my toes just thinking you might die on me. So don't. Do not do it. Come back to me. Choose me. I know you love me. Please wake up. I can't bear it if you die."

Her voice left her as the rage vanished, replaced with more tears. She flopped back in the chair and wept. There she'd told him. Hopefully, he heard her. Knew now that she loved him. If she couldn't have him here, he'd be waiting for her in Heaven.

Then like a giant boulder had been lifted off, she slipped into a gentle gray mist that enveloped her. For the longest, she floated there. He stood on their porch with his arms out. She ran into his embrace, and he smothered her with kisses.

"Do you, Lanelle, do you really love me?"

She pushed on his chest, but he wouldn't let her go. "You know I do. I've been showing you every way I can, except the saying. You made me promise."

Oh, how she loved his laughter. She pressed into his chest and his laugh bounced her. "I told Jethro I was thinking maybe you did, but then he got embarrassed, me talking about us loving on each other."

She snuggled against him. "I love you, Mister Jones."

"I love you, too, Mis'ess Jones."

A hand slipped into hers and squeezed. She didn't want to wake

up. She wanted to stay there with Moses. Where he was alive. Out there...

“Lanelle.”

What? Had her ears...

She jumped to her feet. He held her hand. Sobs burst out and wracked her body. But somewhere down deep, she found her voice.

“Moses.”

“I’m so hungry, baby. We got anything to eat?”

Chapter Twelve



Forgiven. He was forgiven.

Jethro lay all the way down then rolled over onto his back on the church floorboards and closed his eyes. So clean, and pure and so wonderful. Moses better wake up, so he could slap him for not telling him how clean Jesus made a heart.

Everything brand new, he'd never experienced anything like it.

The preacher raised his head then pushed himself to his feet. "Best go see to your friend."

The old man, right as rain. Lanelle shouldn't be left alone. Jethro rolled over and stood. "You coming?" Hadn't he heard something about last rites?

"No. I'll drop by in a day or two."

Jethro didn't understand the preacher's nonchalance. In a day or two, Moses...

The old man put his hand on Jethro's shoulder. "Your friend's awake."

"How do you know that?"

"The Lord told me."

"God talks to you?"

"Yes, He talks to all His children. By the way, you need to be baptized."

"What's that?"

"Ask Moses."

Was it really true? Could it be for real? The joy on the old boy's glowing face definitely indicated he thought it was. Jethro pulled out the Half Eagle again and held it out. "Please take this."

"Of course, brother. I'll accept any freewill offering."

Though he wanted to stay and talk about what had just happened to him, he couldn't wait to get back to Miss Ling's and see for himself if the preacher knew what he was talking about.

His friend and Lanelle needed him. With many thanks, he hurried out, rediscovered his bearings, then trotted the ten blocks to China Town.

He stopped at the side door for a quick blow got his breath back then slipped inside.

Moses sat up in bed with his wife snuggled in beside him.

"It's true. You live."

His friend nodded. "Is it true, Jethro? Have you finally found Jesus?"

The sob caught in his throat, tears filled his eyes. He nodded, then after too many tears, found his voice. "Yes, my friend, I did. Or rather He found me."

Lanelle raised her head and smiled. "Jethro, he woke up."

"Yes, he did." He drew close, patted her hand that now rested on Moses' chest then turned to his partner. "Oh, I ought to slap you." He laughed.

Moses caught his mirth and grinned. "Why? What have I done now?"

"You never told me how wonderful Jesus could make you feel. It's amazing."

The big man snickered, grabbed his chest with his good arm, then grimaced. "Don't make me laugh."

Oh, how wonderful to have his friend back. "Fine, but you best stay on guard, because once you're better..."

Moses gave him a knowing grin. "I need a favor."

"Anything."

"Take Lanelle to a hotel. Lock her in a room and keep the key until she gets some sleep."

She rolled off the bed. "No, sir. I am not leaving your side. I can sleep right here."

Jethro looked from his friend to the man's wife. "How about I take her to the Mercantile. She can see to baby Jonesy and get a good nap at the same time."

"Baby? My love, you've had our baby?"

"Yes, we've got a fine healthy boy—thanks to Mary. I've been waiting for you to wake up to name him." She glanced at Jethro. "Jonesy?"

"Why's he at the Mercantile? I want to see him."

She grimaced. "I'm sorry. I... I was afraid, so worried... My milk wasn't right. Mary's been taking care of him, so I can be with you."

"How long ago? How old is he? "

"A week old tomorrow. Jethro can go and bring him and Mary here. We can come up with a name while he's gone."

"Take her, Partner. After she gets a good nap, bring her back with my son. I want to see my boy, and ask Miss Ling if I can have more soup, but not another drop of that horrible tea." He turned to Lanelle. "I've come back to you, love. Now please, go get some rest—for me."



Lanelle couldn't fight them both. While Jethro hitched the mules, she spoon-fed Moses a few bites of soup.

"No more, please."

She wiped his mouth. "Have I told you, I love you, Moses Jones?"

"Yes, sweet lady. About a hundred times since I came back from our cabin."

A chill danced over her heart. Then spread a warmth over her soul. "I dreamed we were on the porch. When you woke up and took my hand, I didn't want to leave. I was so afraid you'd be dead."

"I asked if you really did love me; you got mad. Said –"

"Yes, I know what I said. That I'd been showing you every way I could, but without the words because you made me promise not to until..."

"From there I went to Brother Paul's church. Saw Jethro on his knees, prayed for him. Oh Lord, it seemed so real, but not in my body. Then boom, I returned here, but where is here?"

"Miss Ling's."

"Oh, mercy. I still can't believe he brought me here. Do you know if he's seen Meiko?"

"Who's that?"

"Miss Ling's daughter, the infamous China Doll. She broke Jethro's heart."

Lanelle couldn't believe her ears. "That's who –" She stopped herself, determined never to let her cousin's name pass her lips. "She's a..."

"That's right. Miss Ling, too, once, but..."

Poor Jethro, poor Mary. The same harlot stabbed them both in the heart. She smiled. "You sure you'll be fine while I'm gone? I'd rather stay."

"No, sweetie, go get our baby boy, and maybe a new dress, and a..." He scrunched his nose and crossed his eyes.

She burst out laughing. "I must look a sight. Hadn't bathed or changed my dress in what? Nine days?" Had it been that long? She kissed him. "Yes, sir, a hot bath and a new dress." She looked toward the door.

Hopefully, Miss Ling didn't lurk around the corner. She leaned in. "Shall I bring you a steak and all the fixings?"

"I'd love one, but maybe just a bite or two." He pressed his head back. "Go on, I need to close my eyes a while."

She hated leaving him, but needed to see to the baby and herself. He'd be there when she returned. Praise the Lord. She didn't deserve it, but He'd heard her prayers and forgiven her and given her husband back to her.

Her love for Him, His grace and mercy, could not be contained,

and neither could her joy.

Like the gentleman he always was, Jethro helped her up to the bench then came around the wagon, unlocked the brake, and headed west.

“Where could I get a hot bath and new dress? Do you have any money left?”

“Enough for that, but the bank’s full of our gold.”

He stopped outside of a barbershop two doors down from a ladies boutique. “If I’m remembering right, this place has private baths.”

“A barber?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s either that or a hotel; want to take the time to go downtown?”

“No, this will be fine. Would you mind making the arrangements while I find me a dress?”

“Not at all, be my pleasure.”

She waited for him to tie off the team then help her down. He kept her hand, turned it over, and filled it with coins. She loved having money. Her whole life, the clan had just scraped by.

And now she was so blessed with a wonderful husband who happened to be wealthy. She wouldn’t love him less if he were penniless, but rich suited her fine. Her elation lasted through the soak and putting on her new dress.

She wanted to burn her old one, but her frugal self couldn’t bear it. It would wash up fine. Then the closer the mules took her to the Mercantile, the thicker the cloud over her heart seemed, and darker by the minute. Breath came hard.

Poor Mary, had she figured it out? Did she even know about the Wheeler men’s feet? Surely, she must. As much as she wanted to send Jethro in for the baby, she couldn’t just sit there.

Besides, she had some gratitude to show. The Buckmeyer princess had saved her baby boy’s life when Lanelle had no time for him.

Accepting Jethro’s extended hand, she let him help her down, then stood next to her in front of the Mercantile. Hmmm, she’d renamed it. Lone Star Mercantile. Well, didn’t matter to her. John ran off, and Caleb... God rest his miserable hide.

“Best we go on in, before she sees us.” He extended his arm.

She took it and leaned hard on him as she climbed the steps to the boardwalk. He opened the door for her and stepped aside. Mary sat at her desk, her face blank at first, then her eyes filled with tears. She knew. She’d figured it out.

Oh, Lord, have mercy.

“Moses woke up.”

She jumped to her feet and ran around the desk. “Oh, cousin, praise God!” She held out her arms.

Lanelle walked into her embrace. "I'm so sorry, Mary."

The girl hugged her tight then put her mouth close to her ear. "Don't be, sweet Lanelle. We can't change the past. We're family, and our babies are –"

"Cousins."

Mary leaned back. "Yes, cousins, just like us."



No punches thrown.

Quite impressed, Jethro backed away once the hugging started. Looked to him the young lady had put all the pieces together. Taking it better than he figured, too, but in her place of business, what else could she do?

Make a scene then run away? He allowed himself a smile, definitely different from two sporting ladies after the same miner.

He strolled the aisles. All sorts of merchandise packed the shelves, twice maybe three times the goods than when John Wheeler ran the place. Mary had a head for business. What had John called her? Oh yes, his Queen of Commerce?

She'd done wonders with the place, and if he had the story straight, she only started with a couple of thousand. Caleb's whiskey hadn't hurt, but still seemed John's bragging wasn't a lie.

"May I help you, sir?"

He spun around. A young man about Elijah's age wore a shopkeeper's apron and leaned on a broom. "Is Mister Wingate around?"

"Right here, Jethro." The old barber rounded the shelf's end, holding his bent fingers out. "You're a sight, son. Heard just now Moses is going to pull through. That's great news, top drawer."

Jethro barely shook the man's hand. "Yes, it is indeed." He nodded toward the boy. "This one any count? Is there more where he came from?"

"Fair to middling, I guess." The man smiled at the boy, who beamed. "Better if someone's watching him."

"Hey, now, Mister Wingate. I'm standing right here."

The old man snorted. "See? This is what I have to put up with all day."

Jethro had a remedy for that, but not many folks wanted partners. "I understand you know of an honest able-bodied boy or two willing to work for wages, Virgil. Don't need any full-grown men just yet."

The boy held his tongue, but when the old man didn't speak up, he stepped forward. "I've got a kid brother and a cousin in need of a steady job. What are you paying?"

"What are they worth?"

"When enough ships came in, they'd get a dollar a day on the docks. But most times no one hires them."

"Old enough to be leaving their mother?"

"My cousin ain't got one, and ours is back east. The three of us come west together, hunting the mother lode."

Same as Jethro, except he'd found it. He pulled out two silver dollars and tossed them to the kid. Have them here... He looked to the old man. "What time you start?"

"Breakfast at seven."

"Have them here then, ready to go and be gone a month."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

He faced his old friend. "After you feed them, work them hard until I can get here, and if you'd be so kind as to gather up whatever you think Elijah and his two new hired hands might want."

"You not staying with them?"

"No, I'm coming right back. Moses needs at least that much time to heal up proper."

"I supposed that's the truth."

"And Lanelle and the baby probably shouldn't be going anywhere just yet."

"Want to stay in my old place? Last man I rented to lit out same day word reached us about the big strike on the Snake."

"I heard you and the Misses were staying here with Mary." Seemed perfect. "We'll take it. Your shop, too."

The boy's jaw dropped. "You ain't even going to ask him how much?"

Jethro faced the kid. He liked the young'un, but he did have a mouth on him. "Virgil Wingate hasn't ever cheated anyone, and he's not about to start with me."

He left the ex-barber and his apprentice to it and finished his inspection. Found Mary at her desk working on a ledger. She looked up as he approached and gave him a little smile. Like a sledge to the temple it struck him.

At Miss Ling's, Meiko had been jealous. That's what he'd seen in her eyes.

The young lady's goodness and intelligence shown so bright, the harlot couldn't compare. But instead of purity, a sensual appeal, a promise of unimaginable pleasure. Many a man fell under her spell, obsessed with her.

Desire drove more than a few beyond the pale.

Mary promised nothing, but so desirable grown men acted like schoolboys. Wanted her to wife and bear their children. Main trouble there, the little Texas beauty had no need of any of them.

Maybe, she and Meiko were different sides of the same gold coin.
Her smile vanished. “Something wrong, Mister Risen?”

Chapter Thirteen



Jethro eased closer. He loved the sound of her voice. “No, ma’am. Not at all, only admiring our store. You have transformed the place.” He took another step. “You got here after the last fire, right?”

“Yes, sir. John had rebuilt some, but was working out of a big tent when we arrived.”

“Do you mind me asking your age, Mary?”

“No, not at all.”

He waited, but she never said, then the corner of her lips turned up slightly. He grinned. “How old are you then?”

“Eighteen, just turned.”

“Makes it even more remarkable.”

“You wouldn’t think so if you knew my father.”

“He a shopkeeper, too?”

She laughed. “No, Henry Buckmeyer is like...” She shook her head, her mouth continued to smile, but her eyes held a sadness that made him want to hug her until her pain eased. “Well, you’d have to meet him to understand. But suffice it to say, I learned from the best.”

“He back in Texas?”

“Maybe. Should be by now. He and his new bride took my three little sisters to Europe; don’t know for certain if they’ve returned home yet.”

Something behind him turned the young lady’s head. He glanced over his shoulder. Lanelle walked toward her holding a baby. “Mary, can you come, please?”

“Excuse me, Mister Risen. It would seem I’m needed.”

“Of course.” He stepped back and let the lady by. A slight hint of rose tickled his soul as she swept past him. He stood there a minute wondering exactly what had just happened. Then decided he didn’t know exactly.

But what he knew full well was he hated her leaving. He shook it off then hunted down Virgil and got the keys to his new home. The old barbershop remained as he remembered. A raised padded chair, mirrors front and back, with a waiting bench next to the front window.

The connecting three rooms, he’d never been in. Door off to the

left opened to a nice-sized parlor that ran into a little kitchen with a bedroom off that. Back door led out to a small barn and free-standing privy. The barn had two stalls and room for the wagon.

He returned to the Mercantile. Her new name for the establishment hadn't grabbed him, but the lady was the boss there. He found Wingate working the boy in the storeroom. For a minute, neither noticed him.

The old man had an easy way with his apprentice, but no surprise, he'd always liked the old barber.

Virgil spotted him. "Oh, Jethro, you're back. That didn't take long. What'd you think?"

"You looking to sell it?"

"We've talked about it, but rather liked the idea of a regular income."

"How about a trade then?"

"What do you have in mind?"

Jethro took him outside to the loading dock and laid out his idea. The boy didn't need to know the man's business. Mister Wingate seemed more than keen on it.

"Of course, I'd have to talk it over with my partners. You visit with your misses, and if the notion still looks good after first blush, we'll draw us up a contract and file it with the claims clerk."

"Oh, they're changing things. The lawyers have got involved."

"How so?"

"Statehood. Got to do it up right. We've got a county government now, and there's even talk of disbanding the Vigilance Committee."

"Whatever we need to do. We'll make it legal."

The old man stuck out his bent fingers. Jethro returned what the man gave.

Soon enough, he had Lanelle and Jonesy back to Miss Ling's. He leaned against the doorframe while she introduced his partner to the baby, then slipped out and found the healer.

"Can I move him?"

"Jones strong man. Not like you, you be dead."

Didn't he know that all too well? And besides dead, he'd be burning in hell's fire, too, if Moses had it right. He needed to go talk to the Methodist priest and see if he believed the same way. "So can I move him?"

She shrugged. "Come, go...healing up to him now. He not need me anymore."

He dug in his pocket, about to hit bottom. A trip to the bank was in store. He retrieved his last Double Eagle. "This enough?"

She took it, tested it with her eyes and teeth, then stuck it in her smock and smiled. "Too much."

Of course it was, but... He turned away.

“Meiko come by.”

He looked back. “She did?”

The old woman raised her bony shoulders then seemed to melt down a good six inches. “She told me to ask you if you’d come to the Dragon. She wants to talk.” Miss Ling relayed her message without any accent.

He didn’t reply.

She stood there a minute, opened her mouth as though she wanted to say more, then wheeled around and vanished, mumbling in Chinese.

Before, he would have crawled back to her if she’d asked. Wouldn’t have been able to help himself. But now... No, he’d not go see her. Meiko had nothing he wanted.

Once he had the boy, newly named Joshua Jethro Jones, returned to his wet nurse, and he helped Moses finish his steak dinner with all the fixings, he laid it down for hopefully the last time at Miss Ling’s.

He dozed off thinking about the China Doll’s request.

Then she was there, and he relived the happy afternoons spent with her before he’d found out. But instead of him following her that last evening to the Dragon, she floated off, calling his name. He ran toward her voice.

Stuck in the middle of a muddy pit up to her neck, she begged for help, but he could not get to her. Ran as hard and fast as he could, but never got an inch closer.

A hand shook his shoulder.

Meiko stood beside his bed. “Jet, I’ve been missing you.”

He reached but only fanned the air. Nothing. He sat up in the pitch black room. She wasn’t there, never had been.

Didn’t even try to get back to sleep, just rose and dressed and shaved then walked the fifteen blocks to the Mercantile. He waited on the loading dock. The boys showed twenty minutes early.

Good, he liked that.



Mary couldn’t figure out what to think about mysterious Mister Risen, sweeping in, taking charge. Would it have been better to give the bankers their blood money and interest than to be in partnership with him?

She appreciated his compliments, and he was definitely not hard to look at, but he certainly carried around a cock-sure attitude that...

Well, she’d filed away the paper Elijah had signed, if Risen tried anything funny. But was that his play? Having the junior partner make the deal then saying he never agreed to it? Again, he’d seemed

very well pleased.

Who knew what the man thought?

She'd be just as pleased if he got out of town and didn't come back. She could send their share of the profits in trade goods.

"More coffee, Miss Mary? Anyone?"

She extended her cup. Mattie filled it and Risen's, then put the pot back on the stove. A question pricked her tongue that she wanted to ask the man, but not in front of everyone. It would have to wait.

If she'd heard right, he and the new boys planned on moving Moses to Virgil's old place, then he was taking them on up to the mine, but that he wasn't staying there.

"You cut hair, Mister Risen?"

"No, ma'am."

"I always thought that place would make a nice dress boutique. I can get readymade or any kind of fabric if you're interested. Say the word, and I'll place the order."

"Hadn't thought of that. We can talk about it when I get back."

There he went again, acting as though he was everyone's boss. She gave him her I'm-so-sorry smile, the one she used on the miners when they got mushy. "Of course, it was only a thought."

One of the babies whimpered, then shortly Mattie called her away, not one minute too soon as far as she was concerned. Risen was so...

No. She would think on good things, pure things, not pig-headed handsome men who thought that just because they'd found some gold, they could snap their fingers, and everyone would do their bidding.

Nursing Susannah calmed her some, drawing every ounce of attention to loving that precious face. The baby always got Mary's head and heart going right for the day. Having Lanelle close would....

Though she hated to admit it—and would never out loud—a part of her wished her cousin would take her husband and go stay up on the mountain with Mister Risen. Mattie swapped babies. She got the boy going then rocked back.

Lanelle had chosen Moses over Jonesy. She best get used to calling him by his real name, but Jonesy did have a nice ring to it. She fed him; that ought to entitle her to have a pet name for the boy.

She could be his favorite aunt. No, he was Caleb's son. Why couldn't she be his mama? Raise him and Susannah as... No, too many folks knew they weren't twins, and Lanelle was his mother.

Mary had better just get used to it.

"Miss Mary?"

She looked up and smiled. "He's almost done."

"Mister Clinton is asking for you."

"Oh. Good. Tell him I'll be right there."

The old dear hurried out. What would she have done without the

Wingates? Once little Joshua got his belly full and then some, she carried him upstairs and put him in the middle of her bed next to Susannah.

She re-fixed the pillows all around then hurried down to see how she could be of assistance to Edward. What a strong name, Edward Clinton. Mary Clinton. Now that had a right nice ring.

She had to stop that. She was a grieving widow.

Or was she? Caleb Wheeler could not have loved her. Why, then, should she mourn him? Oh, Daddy, why must you always be so right? If only she had listened. What would the great Henry Buckmeyer think of Edward?

She found him sitting at her desk, but instead of chiding him for being so rude, she smiled. "Good morning, Mister Clinton."

He stood. "That it is. I've been looking through some of your catalogs. Found several items I need you to order for me."

She slipped past him, but resisted putting her hand on his shoulder, and took her seat, still warm from him sitting in it. She retrieved a pencil, then pulled out her bottom drawer. The letter she'd started glared at her.

Digging under it, she retrieved a clean sheet. "Tell me what and how many? Your wish is my command."

"Well, in that case..." He stopped. She blushed; she knew she did. The warmth exploded in her cheeks, and all she could do was hope they weren't as red as they were hot. Praise the good Lord, he let her off the hook. "I suppose I'll take..." He rattled off half a dozen items then stopped again.

She wrote the last. "Sounds like you're building a house, are you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Up on Nob Hill. The carpenters started on it last week."

"Nob Hill you say? I've heard the views are spectacular up there."

"Oh, indeed. Would you care to come see for yourself one day? I go often to check on the progress."

"That would be lovely, but -"

"Matter of fact, I'm going today if you can get away. Your company would be a pleasure."

Of course, she did. She'd love nothing more. But she couldn't go, could she? Not with him and her being alone, wouldn't be proper. Would it? "I'd love to, but maybe another time when the house is further along, and the babies not so needy."

"Babies, you had twins?"

"No." While he leaned on her desk, she told him about Moses almost dying. "So Miss Wingate and I have been seeing to little Joshua, and well, right this minute I need to stay close."

"I understand. Perhaps when my goods come in, you and Virgil

could bring them up. Bring the babies, too.”

Such a gentleman. Of course, he didn’t mean for her to come alone with him to a house on Nob Hill.

“My father built us a house, not another I know of like it.”

“Tell me more. What makes it so unusual?”

Between the next four customers, she explained then sketched out exactly how he’d built it. Edward tapped the desk then pointed at her drawing. “I must take my leave. Should have gone an hour ago, but so glad I stayed. May I borrow your drawing, Miss Wheeler?”

“Take it, it’s yours. And please call me Mary.”

“If you’ll agree to Edward. And thank you, sweet lady. How soon do you suppose my goods will be in?”

“I’ll post the order with my next shipment. Six or seven weeks if the weather holds.”

“Need any money now?”

She smiled. “All I can get.”

He retrieved a leather wallet from his inside coat pocket and pulled out a fancy embossed card. “Present a bill to my banker, and he’ll transfer the funds.”

She expected coins or at least green backs. She examined the card. Same bank she used, but she’d never dealt with the big gun himself.

He walked backwards toward the door. Appeared he wanted to stay as bad as she wanted him to. He stopped at the door, chuckled to himself, then turned and marched out.

Chapter Fourteen



Jethro hadn't been able to hear much, but the pair's longing looks told it all. Sure hadn't taken the young widow long to get over Caleb Wheeler, not that the scoundrel deserved to be mourned. Still, only dead now, what? Six weeks?

He turned and walked through the storeroom back to the dock. The boys had the wagon loaded and worked on getting the tarp in place. Good. He jumped down and walked around to the front of the Mercantile then strolled in.

"Mister Risen." She stood straightening her skirts as if not quite presentable. "Moses and Lanelle all settled in?"

"Yes, ma'am. She asked if you'd be so kind as to bring Joshua for a visit if you had time after his dinner."

"I could manage that. We'll bring them both."

"What about a bank?"

"Are you needing one, sir? I assumed..." She closed her eyes briefly and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "I use the National. Seems a good as any."

"No." He grinned and shook his head. "The barber shop. I was thinking of starting a bank there. What's your take?"

She came around her desk, put both hands on the edge, then leaned back a bit.

"I don't much care for the bloodsuckers myself, but perhaps operating a more friendly establishment... One not out to steal every speck of gold dust they legally could, and ruin their holders. That might work. Wouldn't you need a vault and armed guards and such?"

"I was thinking of being strictly a miner's bank. Might not work, but my father made a fortune banking." And lost it gambling on Wall Street, but he'd been told nothing required a body to tell everything he knew.

"A miners' bank." She nodded. "Interesting. How would it work?"

"You ever grubstaked anyone?"

"No, John and Caleb never wanted to throw our goods away like that. Why?"

"Back east, they have different names for it, but it's pretty much grubstaking. I believe if we'd be smart about it, make sure whoever

we partner with has at least a decent chance of making a go of it.”

“Only miners? What about, say... Widowed shop keepers who’d like to own all of their business instead of only fifty percent?”

He studied on her a minute, then decided she meant every word. “That’d be possible, of course, but might be a mistake.”

“I don’t think so.” The beauty looked around the store then stepped in too close. The hint of rose proved intoxicating. “I would prefer not to be in alliance with a whoremonger.”

Ah, the flower exposed her thorn. But then, how could a true lady not think ill of him?

The woman at the bottom of her husband’s death who ruined her marriage had known his name. Then Meiko acting so strange at the sight of him with the beautiful widow and the baby. He couldn’t fault her.

“Mary...” What was he doing? He didn’t owe the young woman an explanation, but without one... He wanted to stay in partnership with the Queen of Commerce, wanted her to know the truth.

She retreated behind her desk and sat down. “Jethro... I’m sure you understand. If you’d be so kind as to set the price, I’ll talk to my banker.”

“No, ma’am. Our share isn’t for sale.” He turned and walked out the door.

Didn’t have to tell her a thing.

With no buyout clause in the agreement Elijah had signed and registered at the claims office, he had every right to decline her request. He and his partners owned fifty percent of the Lone Star Mercantile, regardless of what Miss Mary Wheeler thought or wanted.



That man! Mary’s jaw clamped shut. She closed her eyes and thought on Edward. Such the gentleman in comparison to the infuriating heathen. Out of his own mouth, Risen told her he wasn’t a praying man.

The audacity of him!

Our share isn’t for sale, indeed. His harsh declaration echoed. Maybe she’d just see about that. If Moses and Elijah...

Well, his little dab of gold would play out soon enough anyway, they all did. And after he spent all his hard earned wealth at the Golden Dragon, then she’d see. He’d come begging.

For a moment she not only let him grovel at her feet but thoroughly enjoyed it. Then she caught her wicked self and repented.

Oh, Lord, help me to be more like You. Men! Why did You make them so pigheaded and hard to deal with? And why do women want to be loved by one so desperately?

She put Risen out of her mind and determinedly thought on Edward instead. Perhaps he had decided to build that house for her. It could be so, and why was he so keen on her seeing it in its early stages?

True, he hardly knew her, but that very morning, it definitely appeared as though he hated leaving her company. She didn't want him to go either.

Then that horrible man ruined her wonderful mood.

A wonder to be sure that he hadn't soured her milk. She leaned back in her chair, then as if it had a mind of its own, her right hand pulled the drawer open and retrieved the letter she'd started weeks ago and placed it on her desk in front of her.

Dearest Rebecca,

She read down to where she'd left off, only scanning the paragraphs about Caleb's death.

One of my customers is a handsome man named Edward Clinton. He reminds me some of Daddy. He was a captain and fought with Levi and Wallace in Mexico. Such a small world.

Anyway, he's building a house on Nob Hill, a very exclusive area coming together on the side of a mountain, with spectacular views of the Pacific. He ordered the supplies he needs this morning, and it appears the man is building a mansion.

She lifted her pen. What could she say? Though her husband had barely grown cold in his grave, that she might be falling for the man? That he made her swoon shamelessly? Perhaps she should simply change the subject.

I hope you'll please tell Daddy that I love him and I know I was wrong. Though he hates me, I pray he could find it in his heart to forgive me one day. How are he and Mother May doing?

Probably all still pure bliss, I suppose. It's funny how much I miss her. I thought I'd order a shipment of her books for my Lone Star Mercantile. More and more women come to San Francisco all the time.

She thought to scratch that part out about being wrong—or start over—but she'd written it, and it was true. He had been so right about Caleb. Confess your sins one to another, and He would be faithful and just to forgive them.

Couldn't that be so of her Daddy, too? But mercy, he would just love Edward Clinton. Having been to war with Levi and Wallace said a lot for him, didn't it? And he definitely had plenty of money.

A grown man, thirty-one or two at least; Daddy would never call him a boy. She sat there staring at the letter for too long, then placed the page back into the drawer. How could she post another letter to them?

Why didn't they write her back?

Someone should have responded to the letter she sent right after she got to San Francisco. They'd had it almost a year now, yet not a word from anyone. Maybe Daddy hadn't even showed it to anyone else.

Maybe he'd written her off, counted her dead to him.

He shouldn't be so angry, even if he was right.

She was still his daughter. His own blood.

Had to be a pure mean streak, one he'd kept hidden so well all her life. Just like he'd never shown her that wild beast that lurked in his soul, the one capable of killing ten men. The meanness must live in the same dark hole.

Well, she knew him now.

Her going against him cost her, and she was paying the price.

Worst of all though, he made her sisters pay, too.

Surely they still loved her though.



On the way, the youngest boy about wore Jethro out asking questions, but that night and again the next morning, he jumped to whatever task needed to be done; often without being told. The higher into the mountain the mules climbed on the second day, the questions slowed then stopped altogether.

"Mister Jethro, sir, I never dreamed... Only gold camp I seen were a bunch of tents and dirty men working a creek. This here... It's like..."

The older one, Ned he called himself, stood and drank it all in.

"Right smart operation you got here, sir. Two cabins, and what's that machine up yonder there? On higher up the hill from the long Tom?"

"Called a hammer mill."

"And is that a steam engine you got in that shed there next to the mill?"

"That's exactly right. Elijah built it."

As though he'd heard the mention of his name, the young man burst out of the mine and ran toward him. "Jethro, how's Moses and Miss Lanelle?"

He waited until the machinist—as Elijah liked referring to himself as—drew nearer then raised his voice. "Going to be fine. He's awake. Broke up, but he'll be his old self again soon enough."

Slowing to a walk, he stared at the boys. "Who's these guys?"

"Well, I brought you some help. You up to bossing?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I got plenty of work."

After the boys unloaded the wagon and Elijah put the pair to splitting and stacking wood for the boiler, his youngest partner led

Jethro up to the new cabin's porch, out of earshot, but still close enough to keep an eye on his new charges.

"That last blast, the one that got Moses. It opened it up, Jethro. I mean the mother lode, too. We only thought we'd found a lot of gold before. I've filled three powder kegs with dust and flakes and a whole 'nother one's full of nuggets."

The image of his friend covered in crystal and gold still plagued his dreams. That is when Meiko would leave his night visions alone. "You haven't been blasting, have you?"

"No, sir. After I ran that load through the mill, I put in those two sets of timbers we had ready. Done some sledge work, too. The face comes off real easy. After that, went to chopping trees. I thank you kindly for the help, I can sure use 'em, but can we trust them?"

"The older one's Ned. His brother works at the Mercantile, and Cody is their cousin. Come west together looking for their fortunes. Seem harmless enough, but guess you ought to keep an eye on them."

"I will."

"I don't care if you hit a lick at all while I'm gone, but work them hard. I promised a dollar a day. If they're worth more, you let me know."

"Yes, sir. I'm getting real close on that steam hammer."

"Excellent, need any parts?"

"I've got some drawings, but figure I should be there for the casting myself."

"Either way, I'll be back here in a month. Anything you want me to bring then?"

"No, more of what you just brought." He grinned and a twinkle shone in his eye. "Unless you can talk Mary Wheeler into coming."

Jethro laughed. "Not a chance. If what I saw today is any indication, she and some dandy will be walking the aisle soon as it's respectable."

Elijah bristled. "What's his name?"

"Didn't hear, didn't ask, but you best just forget Mary Wheeler and her fancy man." He patted the man's shoulder. "Now where's those kegs? We may need the money."

"Under our feet. Buried them good." He grinned. "What are you thinking?"

"A miner's bank. We grubstake enough men, we can sit us a porch somewhere and rock ourselves into old age."

Elijah laughed, jumped off the porch, then pulled the end boards off. While he retrieved the kegs, Jethro told him about wanting to trade for the Wingate's place. Once loaded, he turned the mules around and headed back.

Where before he couldn't stand the thought of leaving, now he

couldn't stand even spending one night at the mine.

Was that his lot in life?

Always wanting to be somewhere he wasn't?

And with someone he could never have?



By dinner of the second day after Edward left, Mary was about to bust a gut. Virgil had taken his wife off to visit their kin, and while she'd come to love the dear old woman, Mattie would never understand. That left Lanelle.

Plus, she needed to talk with her anyway, but each time she tried to bring up Mister Clinton, the words didn't seem right.

Like always, she nursed Susannah first then let the little man have all he wanted. He was such a wee piglet about it, too. "Go ahead and put her on my bed if you don't mind."

Shortly her cousin returned and pulled a cane bottom chair close. "What's on your mind, Mary?"

"It is that obvious?"

"Yes, now tell me. What is it?"

She rocked back and held it. "Well, there's this customer, and well... I think maybe I'm falling in love with him."

"That would be good. You deserve to love someone who'll love you back, Mary Buckmeyer Wheeler. What's his name?"

"You don't hate me?"

"Of course not. We won't talk bad about our dead, but that sorry you-know-what never deserved either one of us."

Unaware she'd been holding her breath, she exhaled. How wonderful. Why had she thought Lanelle would be unhappy about it? She rocked closer. "He's building a house up on Nob Hill."

Her cousin giggled. "Fancy you."

"Maybe Moses will build you one next door."

"Not us, we like being up in the mountains away from all of civilization's crazies." She bobbed her brows up then scrunched her shoulders forward. "Ever swam in your birthday suit?"

"Sure. Lot of times."

"In an ice cold stream with your husband?"

Mary snorted, couldn't help herself. "No."

"Can't do that on Nob Hill."

Mary had to agree, then a mental gear shifted. Before she lost her chance, she had to bring up that other thing that had been eating at her. "Tell me something else. Jethro Risen said his share of the Mercantile wasn't for sale. You know anything about that?"

"No, not a thing. How'd that come up?"

“Oh, I told him I didn’t fancy being in partnership with a whoremonger.”

Lanelle recoiled. “You didn’t!”

“I sure did. I didn’t rightly mean to say it, but it just kind of came out. The man infuriates me. How he thinks he always knows best and orders everyone around.”

“I know what you mean by that, it’s like his nature, and he is right smart about the best way to do things—just like acquiring the old barbershop for us to stay while Moses recuperates, where I could be close to Joshua.”

“True.”

“But Mary, why would you call him that awful name?”

“The first time I came to Miss Ling’s to feed the baby, we had been sitting in the parlor visiting and in walks the China Doll herself. Before she knew I was there, she started saying something and called him Jet.”

“She didn’t!”

“Oh, yes. So she knows him right well to have a nickname, don’t you think?”

“Sounds like it.”

“Well, she came on in, takes one look at me, than wheels around and marches out without even finishing her sentence. Now what do you think about that? Wouldn’t you say he’s a whoremonger?”

“Maybe, but not yet. How did you know that’s who the woman was? And what would she be doing there?”

Mary shook her head. “I made Virgil take me to the Dragon so I could see the...uh...soiled dove myself after....”

“Oh.”

“And Miss Ling is her mother!”

Her cousin’s eyes grew wide. “No!”

“Yes, ma’am, it’s true. Jethro told me that himself. Seems in her younger days, the old lady made her living the same way.”

Her cousin shook her head. “Moses never told me all that.”

Lanelle leaned back and looked away then got closer again. “Meiko is her real name; I knew Miss Ling had a daughter, but I didn’t know Meiko and the China Doll were one and the same. Jethro met her back when Moses broke his leg, back before we ever came.”

“Did he know she was a...uh...you know...then?”

“Moses didn’t say, but apparently neither of them did.”

“How did Moses break his leg?”

“Stepping off the boardwalk. He said it was bad, bones sticking out. Thought he was going to lose his leg, but Miss Ling fixed him up. Made him stay in bed so he wouldn’t break it again.”

“That was a blessing.”

“Anyway, that’s when Jethro met Meiko and fell in love. The night before Moses was to leave, Jethro and Meiko had a big fight. Moses didn’t know what it was about.”

“Dear mercy.”

“But Jethro didn’t come back to town again until just the other day.”

“Oh my, I had no idea. I’ve been despicable.”

Remorse filled Mary’s heart. How could she have been so mean to jump to conclusions like that? And why hadn’t he defended himself when she called him that appalling name? Her heart took to aching for the man.

“Me and my big mouth! Suppose that night he found out what she really was?”

“Must have, poor fella.”

“I cannot believe I called him that awful name. I feel just dreadful.”

“Well, did he tell you he got saved?”

“No! When? Just the other day he told me he wasn’t a praying man.”

“That must have been before. He told us he found the Lord at Brother Paul’s church the same day Moses woke up.”

“Who’s that?”

“The Methodist preacher. He’s the one married Moses and me.”

“Remember if you will, I wasn’t invited to that party.”

“Well, everything went so fast, me getting bigger by the day.” She giggled. “I asked him to ask me. Best thing I ever did.”

Mary laughed, and Joshua let go and his head fell back like dead weight. The look of pure content warmed her heart. “Well, he’s never done that before. You can just lay him next to Susannah if you don’t mind. Be sure to fix the pillows.”

Once buttoned up, it hit her hard. She’d been so wrong about Risen, and she’d rectify it first time she saw him again. But that didn’t change anything. She had herself a Daddy back in Texas, and she sure didn’t need another man bossing her around here in California.

Edward would never try to tell her what to do.

Somehow, she’d get Mister Risen to sell her their share of the Lone Star Mercantile.

Chapter Fifteen



What had only been a someday notion grew into an urgent need as the mules carried Jethro into town. Three turns later, he set the wagon's brake, jumped down and took off his hat, then walked into the storefront Methodist Church.

The old man knelt at the front bench, head bent over. Jethro slipped to his knees and began reciting the only prayer he knew. The preacher joined him in that prayer then smiled. "Amen."

Glad to be back in the house of the Lord, Jethro returned the grin with one of his own. "Moses called you Brother Paul, is that right?"

The man stood and extended his hand. "Yes, sir. Good to see you, young man."

Jethro took the offered hand. "It's Jethro Risen. Have you got time to talk?"

"Of course, what's troubling you?"

Where should he start? "So much, but it isn't like before. When Moses would tell me things and read from his Bible, I'd...."

"Get riled up?"

"Some, but you see, my father always claimed religion only got invented for the weak-minded, but then I met Moses, and he was anything but."

"Your father, is he still alive?"

"Don't know."

"Your mother?"

"No, she died when I was seventeen."

"Tell me about your parents." Brother Paul put his hand on Jethro's shoulder and guided him to two chairs next to a potbelly stove that sat in the far corner. He retrieved a chair. "Want coffee? I can boil us some."

"No need." Jethro started at the beginning, told the old man about his privileged childhood, raised more by nannies and his governess, and then later, sent off to boarding schools. Once he got to talking more specifically about his mother, he stopped his narrative.

Did the man really need to know about her?

"If you don't want to tell me, that's fine."

"Well, that's just it. It wasn't fine, anything but fine. My father

owned the bank, and made a fortune running it. But in the end, he lost all his money trading securities on Wall Street.”

“I’ve heard about that place. New York, right? Didn’t they use to sell slaves there?”

“Yes, sir, in the old days, but now they just buy and sell pieces of paper. Stocks and bonds. Guess wrong too many times like my father did, then...” He pulled his finger across his neck.

Brother Paul closed his eyes, bobbed his head a few times, then looked him square on. “How’d your mother take it?”

“Not well.” Tears formed, but he blinked them back. What compelled him to tell this man about her? “She... She...”

Brother Paul patted his knee. “Father, comfort my brother. Take the pain out of his heart and give him peace.”

For a few minutes, Jethro sat there in the silence, looking into the past, reliving that day. He’d loved her so much, and had done everything to make her love him. He begged her not to send him away. He didn’t want to leave her—not that day.

Something told him he needed to stay, but obedience.... “I’m the one who found her.” Tears boiled out of his heart and ran down his cheeks. “She was so cold. She hated being cold.”

The old man stood and moved his chair directly next to his. Before he sat again, he wrapped his arms around Jethro’s shoulders. Finally, the tears slowed then stopped all together, and the old man took his seat again, but kept one arm wrapped tight across his back.

The man’s touch radiated comfort and warmth.

A peace settled onto Jethro’s heart where unshed tears had festered for so long. He wiped his face with a sleeve.

“He’d lost it all, the bank our house, everything.” Jethro stiffed his back. “No more school for me. I got that wish, hated being sent away. Went to work on the docks, and that’s where I met Moses.”

“Sins of the fathers, have you heard about that?”

“I guess not, what are you talking about?”

The old man held a finger up and hurried to the altar. He returned with a Bible, flipped pages until he found his spot, and read. “Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.”

“Who’s them?”

He looked up. “Talking about other gods here, telling His children not to bow to them.” He continued. “For I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.”

“So I get punished for my father’s sins? That doesn’t seem right. Is that what it means?”

“No, not exactly. God is telling the children of Israel how things work. You plant corn, that’s what you harvest—corn. Reap what you

sow. Same with bowing down to other gods. The second commandment is not to have any other gods. When you put something—anything—ahead of God, you don't get blessed."

"So I'm doomed to repeat the sins of my father?"

"No, you accepted the Lord's salvation. Not under the curse anymore. You don't hate Him anymore, do you?"

"No, sir. Don't know that I hated Him before."

"There's no gray with God, son. You love Him or hate Him. But Christ became a curse so that we will be blessed. Still, the devil has a right to visit our parents' sins on us." The old man smiled. "In reality, that's a blessing."

"What? How so?"

"Well, the child sees how the parents mishandled their situations and sinned against God. From witnessing their iniquities, younger generations learn from the elders' mistakes. They've seen the bad outcome."

"I think I see."

"Yes, sir. So when the devil comes around with the same temptations, they can make different choices. Overcome."

Made sense. There'd been a nagging, a part of him that hated it that he'd found so much gold, got so rich—like his father. He still wasn't fully convinced, but that voice weakened to only a whispering whimper now.

He pointed at the Bible Brother Paul still held. "Have you got another one of those?"

"No, sir, gave the last one away yesterday."

"Where do I get one?"

"I don't know. There's a church in Georgia that sends me a few from time to time, but I'm not sure where they get them."

"So you give them away?"

"I do."

With so much to learn, he needed his own Good Book. "I best go check on Moses, and go to the..." He stuck his hand into his pocket then held it out. "Ever seen a prettier nugget?"

Brother Paul leaned in. "That's a beauty alright. Can't say that I have."

Jethro put the chunk of gold in the man's hand. "Should bring you a nice price. The jewelers love these, call them character gold."

The old man closed his fingers then hefted his hand. "Bless you, brother."



From her desk chair, Mary could see the comings and goings outside the Mercantile's plate glass window. She loved it that her

adopted town was growing so fast. More and more, folks were saying even if the gold played out, it wouldn't matter.

San Francisco would continue to boom.

Seemed each time she visited the wharf, more of the ghost ships had either been scuttled for lumber or sunk as fill.

Then the very man she needed to see drove his wagon down the street, passed and turned at the corner. Hopefully, to put the mules and wagons in the barbershop's barn. Good. Mister Risen had returned. She'd have it out.

He had to agree to sell for cash money. Edward's banker about fell over himself when she brought it up, right after she presented her bill for the Nob Hill house's supplies.

"Yes, ma'am. I've been hearing good things about you, Mis'ess Wheeler," he'd grinned. "You, young lady, are exactly the type of cliental we want here at First National."

The memory still sent a little wave of chills over her heart. One fine day, when she and Susannah went back to Texas to see her sisters, and Mother May, and oh, Levi and Wallace and Rose, she could tell them she'd built herself a good reputation.

Would Daddy be impressed? Pigheaded man. Why did he have to separate her from the family?

She resisted the urge to run over and confront Risen first thing. Besides, she had some crow to eat, too. Still, one thing her daddy taught her is that it's best they come to you. He'd said it a hundred times at least.

And come they did, hat in hand, wanting to selling him a nice block of black land or set of prime beef. Or could he buy their lint, their baby was sick and they couldn't wait. Of course, he always would, long as the price was right, and even a few times when it wasn't.

Buy and sell, all except for land. She'd never seen or heard him sell one acre of dirt. Like the man wanted the whole valley or the state. If her mother had lived, he'd have probably already been governor or senator.

President Buckmeyer had a nice ring.

But could she vote for such a stubborn, mean-hearted man?

The door's bell tinkled. Risen, his high and mighty self, strolled in and walked right up to her desk. Just like her daddy said, best if they come to you.

"Afternoon, Mister Risen."

He tipped his hat. "You keep Bibles in stock, Mary?"

Scoundrel caught her off guard. "Why, yes. I believe I have three if memory serves."

"I'll take them. And would you be so kind as to include a case for

me on your next order?"

"I'll certainly inquire. The ones I have came in trade."

As though her words hit him full in the chest, he swayed backwards. "Folks trade in their Good Books?"

"Amazing, isn't it? The idiots would give the shirts off their backs if that's what it takes to buy them more time in the gold fields."

"Where you keep them?"

Pointing to the center aisle, she smiled. "Top shelf, about halfway down." Why was he so all-fired focused on those Bibles? Maybe Lanelle told her the truth. Maybe he truly had gone and got himself saved, but still....

He retrieved all three then brought them to the counter. "What do I owe you?"

She stood. "Nothing. Take them, they're yours."

He smiled, gathered the books. "Thank you, ma'am." Then he turned and headed toward the front door.

"Mister Risen?"

He looked back. "Yes, ma'am?"

"I've spoken with my banker. I'll give you the original ten thousand you paid to John—cash money—plus interest. Say the word, and he'll make the transfer."

"Our part isn't for sale." He threw her a condescending, smug little smirk. "Sorry you went and wasted your time."

Oh, she wanted to slap his face, but instead she smiled. "Oh, I doubt I have. Pray tell, sir. Why not?"

"I like the Mercantile. You've done wonders with it."

No! He could not sweet talk her into changing her mind. She'd have it all, or.... "Then buy me out. I'll start another."

"No, thank you, ma'am. I like our arrangement just the way it is." He tipped his hat then strolled out.

Her cheeks burned. The arrogance of the man! Good thing she didn't apologize—he certainly didn't deserve one. He may not be a whoremonger, but he definitely made a perfectly terrible partner.

Well, he might boss everyone else around, but he better not be trying to tell her what to do, or he'd get a piece of her mind!

The burn cooled, and then her mistake hit her.

She didn't want to sell, she wanted it all. But if not, she'd take her half and make the best of it. Maybe Edward could convince Risen to change his mind. Either way, she wouldn't be leaving the Lone Star Mercantile.



Once Jethro stepped off the Mercantile's porch, he patted his pocket. His stomach soured, then he realized he'd given Mary's nugget

to Brother Paul. Why had he done that? And for that matter, why had she?

Why was the woman so intent in buying him out?

He hated how she did him.

Well, fine. That fancy man could have her.

Should have said yes the first time when she called him a whoremonger. He sighed. She couldn't know. Why yes, Mary, buy me and my partners out, only the asking price was twenty now, twice what we paid John, because you've done so good and the....

He opened the old barbershop's front door.

Moses sat in the barber's chair, his wife trimming his hair. Lanelle looked his way. "Want to be next? You're getting plenty shaggy."

"No, Horace would skin me if I let anyone else cut my hair."

Would not do for her to be putting hands on him anyway. Not her or any other woman. "How you feeling, partner?"

"Better, but don't make me laugh."

"Good, up to getting out for supper? I could stand a steak."

Moses looked to his wife. "What do you think, Babe. Got anything planned?"

"No, and yes. I'd love getting out. Want me to ask Mary? I hate her being all alone."

Before Jethro could say no, Moses shot his big mouth off. "That would be great. The four of us, and the babies, too. Maybe that bath you forced on me won't be wasted after all."

What could he do? Hopefully, the Mercantile's proprietress had other plans.

Like Moses and Lanelle conspired against him. He sighed. Well, he could be nice to anyone a few hours. Best go to Horace's and get in line. Perhaps a bath would be in order, too. And a new shirt, and maybe a pair of britches.

Maybe even a... No. Why bother? She hated him, made it clear. No reason for him to get all gussied up for the beautiful widow.



Mary agreed too fast then tried to back out when Lanelle mentioned Risen was coming. But her cousin laughed off her excuses and wouldn't let her renege.

"We'll fetch you at seven. Wear that blue dress, it really sets your eyes off, and –"

Mary held her free hand up. "Cousin! It's just supper, and believe it or not, I can dress myself."

"I know, but..." Her friend ducked her chin and grimaced.

"What."

"Oh, that Clinton guy."

“What about him?”

“It’s just that... You let me pick for you, and I’ll take Jethro Risen over that blue-at-the-mizzen fop any day.”

“Don’t call him that. He is neither haughty or a dandy. He’s more a man’s man, fought with Levi and Wallace Rusk in the Mexico.” She rocked back and held it.

What in the world was Lanelle saying. “...doesn’t deserve to be in the same room.”

“Edward is a gentleman! A wealthy, successful business man. Jethro Risen is... He’s a...” She looked off then back. “I’m too much a lady to say exactly what the man is, but you just don’t know my Edward if you think that, that miner—no matter how much gold he’s found—even comes close....

“Mary!”

She laughed. “I tell you true, Cousin. I’d rather have Elijah than Mister High and Mighty Risen.”

“You can’t mean that.”

She rocked forward. Joshua had finished. “Here, he’s done.”

Her cousin relieved her of the boy and saw to her son, but stopped in front of Mary once she finished buttoning up. She seemed to want to say more but decided to take her leave instead. “See you at seven.”

Mary returned to work. The light traffic allowed her to get the day’s receipts logged in. The store emptied a few minutes after six, and she decided to go ahead and lock up early. Wouldn’t do to have one last customer rush in and make everyone wait on her.

Though, it wouldn’t bother her one iota to make Risen wait.

Shame the man had not stayed at his mine.

As promised, her partners fetched her at seven sharp. All commented on how lovely she looked in her new lavender dress and white shawl. Risen’s compliment caught her off guard. His eyes bored into hers.

How? Why? Never had a man looked all the way to her soul like that. Dear Lord, she must look away!

It lasted much too long, but finally, unable to gaze elsewhere, she made herself close her eyes. The last thing she needed was another man bossing her around. Henry Buckmeyer had been plenty....

Anyway, she neither needed nor wanted another father.



“Sweetheart, come to bed.”

Henry looked from the burnt piece of paper to his wife who stood in their bedroom’s doorway. “Crockett done with his midnight snack?”

“Yes, sir, and he wants his daddy to come to bed. We both do.”

He stood, grabbed the oil lamp, then took one more look at the piece of envelope with only his name and address legible. And that barely. "Why doesn't she write again? Mercy, it's been almost a year. Doesn't Mary know steamboats catch fire and burn every day? My hard-headed beauty.... Could she think we don't love her or that we aren't desperate to hear from her? Anything."

"Oh, my love, I can't imagine what's gotten into her. Perhaps Caleb..."

"A post with only 'I'm alive' would suffice. She's got to know we're concerned. Maybe we should just go to California."

"Sweetheart, talk about finding a needle in a haystack."

"But maybe we could ask around. Anything would be better than this. I mean if Caleb thinks I mean him harm, fine. Don't tell us where they are, but..."

His wife joined him, slipped her hand into his free one. "We can go to California if you want. That's where they went, I'm sure of it. Especially since the Wheelers said John had gone the year before."

"Maybe they could give us the name of a town."

"It's where everyone's going these days."

He kissed her cheek. "Then what? When we find them? Shoot Caleb and drag our baby girl back home?"

"I like the dragging her back to Texas part, but surely her husband can come, too. Can't he?"

"Of course." He grinned. But if the boy was so stupid to come back, Henry would be honor-bound to feed him to the hogs.

Chapter Sixteen



Great food.

Jethro couldn't remember the last time he'd had a better meal or a more pleasant evening. The widow kept her claws sheathed, even when she caught him staring at her. Each time, he'd held her gaze for what?

How many ticks of his pocket watch? Would have been fun to measure each look. See how long it took before she closed her eyes or turned her attention to her plate.

Healthy appetite.

Nothing like his mother's, who only rarely took more than one tiny bite of each entrée at her fancy supper parties. The woman wouldn't dare gain a pound, or maybe she thought of eating as low class?

Well, he'd place Mary Wheeler on the top shelf, and though somewhat self-conscious about it, she didn't leave a morsel on her plate.

Neither did she have the tiny waist his mother sported, but her figure... He made himself stop thinking about her or her desirability. The young lady's presence had only to do with being social.

Besides, she couldn't know how to defend herself from the son of a man who had taught him the art of seduction and... No, he refused to think about him either.

He retrieved the Bible—the one he'd kept for himself—turned his oil lamp up, and opened it. Exactly who was King James? He needed to ask Moses about that.

IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH

Long into the night, he read. Why hadn't he been taught this stuff in school? And why had his father garnered such a negative notion about God?

A hand touched his shoulder. He jerked upright. Meiko stood in front of him wearing the same cheap, flimsy silky dress she wore every day of those three weeks.

"I know Mama told you. Why haven't you come to the Dragon? I need you, Jet."

"No, I'm not ever coming back there."

“Your loss.” She smiled that intoxicating smile then vanished, along with the misty glow that surrounded her.

He jerked up. The Bible lay opened in front of him. The lamp’s oil spent. Why was he still dreaming of Meiko?

TO FIND A WIFE IS TO FIND A GOOD THING

“What?” He looked around the room. That same voice that spoke to him before told finding a wife was good? Could He mean the China Doll?

He struck a match, found another lamp, and got it going before the lucifer burned down. Lucifer. Wasn’t that the devil’s name? He should stop calling matches that.

According to Moses, he was heaven bound now, and the devil had been thrown out, right? So much to learn. He pulled out his watch, four forty-four.

Might as well get the coffee on and read some more. Poor Jacob, that Laban had tricked him, but then gave him his love, too. Would he want two wives? By the second cup, the story had gotten worse.

The sisters had given him their handmaids to bear him more children. Fathering babies with four woman, and they all lived together.

Who knew all that was in the Bible?

Twelve sons and a daughter. Man, oh man, if Jacob came to the California gold fields, some lovesick miner would have killed him over his ladies. Only natural to think his situation totally unfair, him with four and the miners with none.

Shortly after the sun shone its new day, Moses joined him, but kept his peace while Jethro read. Got his brew and settled near the window.

Poor Jacob, the man couldn’t catch a break. Of course, he lied to his father, but Esau already gave up his birthright for the soup, so wasn’t it Jacob’s by right? At least his brother hadn’t killed him.

Then those rotten sons! Granted, he had favored Joseph and given him that coat, but still, those older boys of his tricked him. They lied and broke his heart. But how could they sell their own brother into slavery? Guess that seemed better than leaving him in that hole to die.

He marked his place then faced his friend. “I dreamed about Meiko last night.”

The big man offered no comment. Sure not his talkative self that morning.

“She wanted me to come to the Dragon, said she needed me.”

Moses smiled and stood then headed for the coffee pot.

“What are you grinning about?”

“You. First time you’ve spoken of dreaming about her.” He held the pot toward him, and Jethro nodded and lifted his cup high. “And,

you're still here; didn't go running right over there as you might have before."

While his friend refilled his coffee, he studied him. Could that be right? He'd never shared his dreams of the China Doll with his partner? "Never?"

"Aye. 'Tis true, never, not once. Before you discovered her truth, she's all you wanted to talk about." He chuckled. "Well, her and how much gold we'd find."

"Forget her. Why hadn't you ever told me about Jacob and his sons?"

"I do not know. Seeing as you weren't so keen on hearing any Bible stories. I concentrated on telling you about Jesus."

He set his coffee down and stuck out his hand. His friend grasped it and shook it firmly. Tears blurred Jethro's eyes, but he managed to speak. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

"You are welcome, indeed. But praise God, He's the One Who did it."

He nodded then tapped the Bible. "Brother Paul needs more Good Books to give away. Want to go shopping? Mary only had three."

"No, not me. After the dab of walking last night, believe taking it easy my due this day."

"Of course." The big man looked almost new. His bruises all but gone, but still, it'd only been a few weeks since he almost met his Maker face to face. "Any ideas where to start?"

"Best ask Mary or maybe better, Virgil."



Mary couldn't understand it. Why she even gave Mister Risen one thought remained a mystery, much less the fifty-six or eighty-two times already that morning.

Ridiculous.

Preparing for the day, seeing to the babies and through breakfast, he haunted her brain. Where was Lanelle, anyway? She'd usually come by now.

Determinedly, she kept the miner at bay, but Risen clung to the edges of her mind's eye waiting with that look, his grin. She hated how he could see into her soul. Preposterous that it made her go all weak at the knees.

Stupid man.

Why was he being so nice? Not one time all evening long had he ordered her or anyone around.

Probably on his best behavior trying to convince her to stay partners. He recognized the Lone Star Mercantile succeeded so well

because of her. That the store needed her and her head for business.

He only wanted to make money off of her hard work. Humph, didn't take a genius to see that. But why did that bother her so?

It had been a nice evening, but once she and Edward...

"Want me to go see?"

She looked up. Mattie smiled from across the kitchen table, Josh sleeping in the crook of her arm. "I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"Miss Lanelle. Shall I go over and see if something's wrong? She's usually here by this time of a morning."

"No need. You can put him down with Susannah. We were out late last night. She's sure to be along soon."

"Yes, ma'am. As you wish."

At the stroke of eight, Mary nodded toward Hank, who unlocked the front doors then went to work with his duster. She settled in her chair and opened her ledger.

Yesterday had been a good one. She pulled out her inventory book as well and looked at each item. She needed to lower prices on a few items, get some of her mistakes out the door, never to return.

"Good morning."

She leaned back. Jethro Risen stood at the counter. "Where'd you come from? The bell didn't ring."

"Loading dock, our man gave me a few places to check, but thought I'd check with you as well. Do you have any idea where I might find more Bibles?"

She rattled off the names of her competition in town. "Should I cancel your order then?"

"Oh, no, I want that case for sure. Looking for some more, for the interim. But your suggestions are all the same places Virgil thought. Anywhere else you can think of?"

"Nothing comes to mind. Three aren't enough? You can only read one at a time, right?"

"Brother Paul gives them away, and he's completely out. I'd like to help."

Noble; maybe he'd changed for the better after all. She tilted her head. "Are you keeping one for yourself?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am." He backed toward the front door then stopped. "Do you happen to know who King James was?"

"I do. The king of England, oh, back in the sixteen hundreds or so. For centuries, only the clergy owned Bibles with scriptures written in Latin, translated from its original Hebrew and Greek. They used that to control the people, but King James changed all that. He commissioned several groups of religious men, in four or ten different places to translate them into English."

"Wow, I'd say you do. How is it you know all that?"

“My mother loved books and their knowledge. She ordered boxes on every subject imaginable.” The reminiscing brought a sweetness long forgotten. The excitement when a new shipment arrived. It’d been ages since she’d remembered those days. “Then a new set of men decided on the best translations before printing King James’ Bibles.”

The man looked genuinely interested. “Bless the old boy’s heart. Good to know.”

“Putting scriptures in the hand of the common people changed so much.”

“I can see where it would.” He took another step toward the door then stopped again. “Care to go shopping with me? Lanelle could go with us to...I mean if you thought...uh, might be a good excuse to check out the other shops?”

“I thank you, but no. I need to stay around here, the babies and all.”

“We could take them along. Or be back before it was time to... They might enjoy getting out, too. Neither made a peep last night.”

Why was he doing all this? A day off would be wonderful, and if Lanelle went along, not even her father could say a word. “Seems a lot of trouble, Mister Risen.”

“It’ll be fun. And who knows? You might see something we want for the Mercantile.”

There he went again, acting like he had any say in what she stocked. As though the partnership papers were written in stone. But still. “Oh, alright, if Lanelle is willing, then yes, it would be fun to see what the other stores are carrying, and maybe a little as to how they operate.”

He hurried out and trotted across the street. Oh, how absurd. Why had she agreed? She had so much to do. Needed to decide what went on sale and make the signs. However, she had agreed, and like her daddy always said, her word was her bond.



Surprised Jethro that Moses and Lanelle jumped at the idea. Why did he think he’d have to talk them into it? Didn’t surprise him that it took half the morning to get gone, then Lanelle, bless her heart, insisted she sit in the back with the babies.

“Go ahead, Mary. We’ll take turns.” But she made sure to be the first one in the wagon.

Fun half day.

Procured ten Bibles, all used though. Didn’t run across a new one anywhere, but an idea smacked him alongside his thick skull. Paper, ink, some machinery, Elijah probably could build it; Mary said King

James was long dead.

Then on the way back, after he mulled the idea over and around, he turned sideways, careful not to touch the young widow. "You know for a fact, it was in the seventeenth century when King James published his Bible?"

Making a silly face at him, she reached behind him and retrieved one of his latest purchases. "I can tell you for a fact I wasn't alive then." She flipped it open; read several pages then put it back, barely grazing his arm on its return. "Thought it might say, but it doesn't. If memory serves though, I'm nigh on to certain. Yes."

"Know anything about book binding?"

"Binding? No. Well, some I suppose, a little. They call that last one saddle stitched, but past that, not too much. Why? What are you thinking?"

"If the good king is long dead, why not print our own copies?"

"Why not indeed? Do you have that much gold, Mister Risen?"

"Maybe, I don't know, but call me Jethro, won't you? We are partners after all."

She nodded, looked forward for several clops of the mules' hooves, then glanced back to him. "I still would prefer not to be."

He nodded. There it was. Just like he thought, the lady was only being social. She had not come because of him, as he'd hoped. She came to measure her competition, perhaps enjoy a day off with her cousin and baby.

He wanted to keep his interest in the Mercantile, but the no wouldn't make it to his lips. He didn't want to disappoint her. If the truth remained that she didn't want any part of him, maybe he should let her buy him out.

Moses and Lanelle could do what they wanted. But the fine-I'll-sell didn't even make as far as the no.

Oh, Lord, what was he going to do?

TO FIND A WIFE IS TO FIND A GOOD THING

The words from that morning echoed in his heart, but unlike Jacob's days, he couldn't make a deal with her father. The young lady, quite responsible for herself, had a mind of her own, and even if...

A hand rested on his shoulder. "Jethro, wasn't that our turn?"

He looked back at Lanelle, chuckling. "Yes, it sure is. Guess I was too deep in my thoughts." He eased the mules to a stop, waited for the wagon behind him to pass, then backed up three wagon lengths. "Sorry about that. Been thinking about poor Jacob, how Laban had treated him so bad."

Neither of the ladies commented, and he said no more until he stopped in front of the Mercantile. He hopped down and hurried around to help Mary, then to the back for Lanelle after she handed

over the babies. Hank showed, and the boy carried the packages Mary had bought for herself.

The widow extended her hand.

Taking it, he resisted the urge to kiss it, but didn't release it.

"Thank you for a wonderful day. Please let me pay you for the things I bought. So stupid of me to go shopping and not bring any cash."

He backed a step. "No need, you wouldn't let me pay for the Bibles. Fair's fair."

"Well, thank you again." She faced Lanelle. "You coming in?"

Jethro left them to it. Women and their babies. Besides, he had some pondering to do. Why had the Lord told him twice to find a wife? Was He trying to tell him to wed Mary? Didn't He know she hated him?

If she had no desire to be partners with him in business, what kind of chance could he possibly have of making her his wife?

A life with Mary Wheeler.

What would it be like married to such a woman?

All the way downtown, he contemplated that very thing. Sure would be a challenge. Not as bad as Shakespeare's shrew, but she definitely needed some taming. His bank came into view, and he purposed to remove the young lady from his thoughts.

He needed to figure out how much cash to withdraw. Once he double-checked his mental list, he presented the draft to the clerk. The man took one look at it, raised his gaze and stared at him a minute, then excused himself.

Was something afoot? Wasn't like he wanted all their gold. Shortly, he had his answer.

An older gent dressed exactly like his father once had, strolled toward him. The man extended his hand. "Mister Risen, pleased to see you, sir. I'm J. Pierce Prescott. Would you be so kind as to give me a moment of your time?"

Jethro shook. "You own the National?"

"Yes, sir, I do." He held out his hand toward the office he'd just emerged from.

Why not? Never hurt to know powerful men, get the measure of this titan of San Francisco commerce.

Once inside and seated, J. Pierce turned a bit and pointed toward a crystal bottle of brown liquid standing tall amidst a neat circle of jiggers. Of course, all rested on a silver serving tray that sat on a hand-carved credenza.

"Care for a brandy? Mister Clinton has been so kind to gift me with a case."

Sorry bankers, get you drunk, then the next thing you know, you're

signing away your life. "No, thank you, sir; not much of a drinker."

"Understandable. Hard rock mining takes a steady hand."

"That it does. I don't mean to be rude, sir, but I'm short of time."

"Of course." The man smiled then turned serious. Must need to talk about money. "The afore mentioned Edward Clinton is buying claims in the area. You and Moses Jones came to mind. I'd heard he'd woke up and was doing better, but thought... Are you interested in selling out? Mister Clinton is offering top dollar."

Jethro stood. "No, sir. We're happy with our little operation." He backed up a step. "You did say Edward Clinton, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Of the New York Clintons?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"No, not Edward. My father and Dewitt crossed swords a time or two. The governor is his father, correct?"

"Uncle." The banker stroked his goatee. "I hadn't put it together before. Is your father Boaz Risen?"

"Yes, sir. Dear old Dad."

"How is he? I heard he'd had a reversal."

"Wouldn't know. Haven't seen him in better than ten years."

The man rose and joined him at the door, extending his hand again. "Should you change your mind, let me know. I'll be happy to negotiate the deal."

Jethro shook, but no way would he sell out to Clinton. If the man was cut from the same cloth as his uncle... Well, didn't matter. He'd never sell the mine.

Then a horrible thought hit him.

Chapter Seventeen



With the weather not changing much at all, the days slipped along without much notice for Mary. Risen leaving so abruptly couldn't have come soon enough for her, especially if he stuck to his guns and refused to sell her back John's share. If only she'd known Edward better then or had been dealing with Mister J. Pierce Prescott himself.

Interest only, and she would have borrowed the money in a heartbeat to buy him out. But no, he'd got his pride hurt and run off and sold to Risen. Of course, she still thought ten thousand too high a price, but the miners paid it right off. Funny, didn't bother her at all that Moses and Elijah had a share.

And now looked like she'd be in partners with the Wingates, too.
"Miss Mary?"

She looked up. "What is it, Hank?"

"Mister Virgil said he got word our next shipment done come in, but his back is still painin' him. And boy, with those crippled hands. You can tell they're painin' him something terrible. Want me to go it alone to get it?"

"Think you can handle it? You'll have to justify the merchandise to the bill of lading to make sure you pick up everything we paid for."

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I been helping Mister Virgil for a while now, watching close on how to do everything." He stepped in closer. "Now I'll beg you not to mention it, but he can hardly drive a team anymore, or do much at all. I know he hates it."

She mirrored the boy's concerned expression then smiled. The man could still talk and watch over things well enough for her. "Go on then, tell him I said so. Don't lie, but you can make it sound like it was my idea if you want."

He grinned then hurried out, and Mary turned her attention to her bookwork. Maybe the items Edward ordered for his house arrived in this shipment.

Maybe she and Hank could deliver the load tomorrow after dinner while the babies took their nap. She could see for herself what kind of house he was building.

That evening after she personally inspected each item and had

them on the dock ready to load tomorrow, she went to inspecting her wardrobe. He might not even be there, but if he happened to be....

No sin in wanting to look her best. The lavender? No, too fancy. Plus, she'd wore that when she and Risen....

Why did she keep thinking about him? Mercy, the lavender would be fine. Or would it?

"Silly girl."

If she didn't know better, she could swear that her mother's voice had just come out of her mouth. She'd only seen Edward once in the last week. He came to check on his order, may have gone back out.

The man probably wouldn't even be there. She and Hank would deliver his goods, then she'd be gone after a quick look around.

She could wear any old thing. It didn't matter.

Contrary to what she'd convinced herself of the night before, that next afternoon, when she climbed aboard her wagon, she wore her new cranberry dress with her pink shawl and bonnet.

Pushing her weekly bath up a few days, she splurged on a bit of rose water, too, the real high-priced stuff she hardly ever used.

Hank had trouble keeping his eyes on the road, so cute. "Wow, it's coming right along."

She glanced at the young man who clearly fancied her, smitten silly. "You sure this is it?"

He made that all too plain a long time ago. Pulling the mules around to the rear of the structure, he expertly backed close to the three-story monster that rested atop a small knoll, halfway up Nob Hill.

"Yes, ma'am. Don't ya remember when me and Mister Virgil delivered that load of fancy boards Mister Edward had shipped in?"

The view amazed her. What a difference getting up high made. "Yes, I do, now that you mention it. So this is it. Yes, I guess it is definitely coming along." She fell silent as the boy set the brake and hopped down.

Grounds still needed work, but the gardens Edward had told her about were really taking shape. She loved it. Made the house Daddy built for Mama seem quaint. She could hardly wait to see the inside.

To her surprise and great pleasure, Edward suddenly appeared at the wagon's side, holding his hand out toward her. "Mary, what a treat, you coming with Hank. I take it those are my fixtures in the back of the wagon."

"Yes, sir." She let him help her down then held his hand as he led her inside. "It's beautiful, and that view..."

"Isn't it great? You'll have to come sometime at sunset. Come see how she's coming along. You can probably give me a few ideas, help me make some decisions."

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Her cheeks warmed.

He took her straight through to the double front doors then wheeled around. The grand entry hall reached up all three stories. A wide, magnificent circular stair wound around all the way to the top.

Workmen hurried about almost everywhere she looked. Counted better than a dozen then stopped trying. Each room he showed her, impressed her all the more.

Wasn’t a house at all, more a mansion.

“ ’Scuse me, Miss Mary.” Hank touched his hat. “I’ve off-loaded Mister Edward’s goods.”

“Thank you. I’ll be along shortly.”

“Wait, you’ve come all this way, and there’s no need to go now. I’ve got to go to town myself. I’d count it a blessing to drop you off later. I have a supper meeting with Prescott and pass right by the Mercantile.”

Her heart picked up its beat. “Are you sure it’s no trouble?”

“None. I promise.”

Everything couldn’t be working out any better if she planned it herself. Of course, there wouldn’t be a chaperone, but who’d know? She didn’t answer to anyone anyway. She faced the boy. “You know your way back then?”

“Yes, ma’am, for sure.”

“Well.” She turned and gave her handsome new chauffer her sweetest smile. “I’ll see you there later.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The boy disappeared.

Edward continued his tour. Every room had a different wood or stone or special something or other that he pointed out. Talk about cute, like a kid with a new toy, so proud.

But rightfully so, the man obviously knew exactly what he wanted and had excellent taste. Engrossed with the process of getting it all how he wanted, he saved the room she loved the best for last.

His library office even had its own fireplace. At least twice the size of her daddy’s, it reeked luxury.

Edward had imported the wood all the way from Brazil. Three of the paneled walls featured floor to ceiling bookshelves out of the same cumaru wood, so rich and lovely.

His desk, custom built from a British ship sunk in the War of 1812, was absolutely striking.

“My daddy fought the Battle of New Orleans with Jackson.”

“Yes, Levi mentioned that.” He retrieved a bottle from the credenza behind his desk and poured two tiny little glasses half full then extended one to her. “A toast to my girl.”

Surely he had not referred to her, had he? She took the offering. What would one little toast hurt? “Your girl?” Good heavens, she

didn't say that out loud. Somebody please tell her she had not just asked him that.

"The place." He grinned and lifted his glass turning it slowly. "I haven't decided on her name, but she's definitely my girl."

"Your home, yes, of course. Let's toast your girl by all means. She's positively a beauty." She clinked his little glass with hers then downed her drink. "Wow. What is that? It's like honey fire, and oh, it burned so good all the way down."

"Brandy, straight from France." He poured her another.

Being such a small amount, two wouldn't hurt, but that time, she wouldn't toss it like hard liquor. Sipping made it taste even better, and it barely burned at all, just a little, and oh so good. It tasted splendid.

"Brandy is wine, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Correct."

She held her glass out, trying to give it back, but he filled it again, then moved in close, much too close. Time to get out of there. She tossed the drink, dropped the glass then put her hands on his chest.

"Edward, we..."

He bent over and held his mouth only inches from hers, lips parted. For a few beats of her heart, she held her ground, then reached up and pressed her lips against his. He tasted so good, those full lips of his so soft.

She let her hands fall, and he wrapped his arms around her, and kissed her for real. She melted into him. Exactly what she'd been dreaming of, Mis'ess Edward Clinton. He loved her, and had done all this...for her.



He stopped outside the Mercantile, set the brake, then ran around and opened the buggy's door. Mary filled her lungs then took his hand.

"You've been so quiet, my darling. I hope you don't have any regrets."

"It'd be so hard to say I regretted going to the moon, but..." She stepped down and touched his chest. "Do you have to leave?"

"Yes, if I close this deal tonight; but I'll only be gone a few weeks. I'll send word either way."

She nodded then strolled into the store as though this most wonderful of afternoons was like any other.



Jethro retrieved his pad, noted another question for Brother Paul or Moses or whoever wanted to answer. Oh, Lord, how can I

understand all this without some help?

Movement caught his eye. He let the chair rock forward, grabbed the long gun that rested against the cabin, and laid it over his lap. The driver stood and waved. Elijah. Good, him and the boys were back, and only one day late.

He went back to his Bible study as the mules picked their way up the hill. Wagon sure looked a dingy white. Why had they put the canvas on? Guess it didn't really matter. Mornings were a bit chilly.

Elijah reigned the mules to a stop short of Moses' porch.

"Have troubles? I expected you yesterday."

"Sorry, boss."

Ned jumped down, smiled and threw a nod toward their cabin. "Got any beans boiling?"

"No, but feel free. I snared a rabbit, too. You can get him to roasting if you want."

"Yes, sir." Ned glanced at his cousin, who sat on the wagon's bench with his head hanging down. The older boy grinned then hurried off.

Jethro decided to wait on Cody and the new boy who hid in the wagon. "You find any Bibles?"

"Yes, sir, sure did; bought five, all used."

"What about a printer? Sacramento have one?"

"Yes, sir, a newspaper man has set up shop. Says he takes on side work."

"Get a good look at his press?"

"Yes, sir, just like you asked. Wouldn't be easy, but we could build one."

"He interested in selling?"

"No, said black ink ran in his veins, but he might consider taking on a partner if the price were right." Well now, that was interesting. A trip to the capital might be in order. "Cody."

The boy looked up. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"For what are you sorry?"

He looked away then back. A pained expression screwed his face all up. "I sinned and fell short."

"Did you get drunk?"

"Yes, sir, and this whore..."

Elijah punched his arm. "Young fool! Nowhere is it written you're bound to tell everything you know. Mister Jethro don't want to hear about no sporting ladies."

"He's right. Go help Ned. We'll talk about it later."

The boy flew off the wagon and ran up the hill. Jethro leaned sideways. "Who's our new friend there?"

The boy, maybe sixteen tipped his hat. "Amos, sir."

"I hired him, him and his little brother."

“He’s got a brother?”

Amos reached back and pulled out a miniature version of himself, all the way down to about the dirtiest face and biggest hat Jethro had ever seen on a kid. Oh, Lord, got myself a mine here or an orphanage?

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME

Jethro closed his eyes. He’d just read that scripture yesterday. Like the Lord knew who would be coming today.

“He don’t eat much, sir, and you don’t have to pay him. He works hard, but he ain’t that strong, so feed is all and a place to sleep.”

“Where’d you find these two? Where’s their folks?”

Elijah looked to Amos then back. “A long tom busted, fell on their dad and broke his back. Died two days later. Their ma lasted until Amos got all the dust panned out. Next morning, she lit out with the mule, gold, and anything else of value before they even got up. I found them on the way here.”

“We got an uncle in San Francisco, if he ain’t done gone, but that lady—she weren’t our ma anyways. Pa ordered her through the mail.”

Elijah scooted away like the boy had turned into a rattler. “You can order a wife in the mail?”

“Yes, sir, but he didn’t get no prize. She be a good ten year older than him and ugly! Oh, man, she were a rough old gal. But she could cook.”

“What’s little brother’s name?”

“Francis, but only answers to Shorty.”

The little feller climbed out of the back. He stood on the wagon’s seat and put his hands on his hips with a glaring I-dare-you smirk plastered on his mug. Cute little cuss, looked maybe five or six. Jethro jerked his hand toward his shoulder, thumb out, but before any words escaped –

TAKE HER TO MARY, SHE NEEDS A MOTHER

Chapter Eighteen



What? Jethro stood. He walked closer and eyed Shorty hard. Behind all the bluff and bluster, fear swam in her eyes. "Elijah, offload any supplies. I best take the two young'uns to town. See if we can find their uncle."

"This afternoon?"

"That's right. Now get the lead out. I'd like to get off this mountain before dark."

The boy whistled up some help, then once he had the others working, Jethro pulled him aside. "You remember all the places I stashed the guns?"

"Yes, sir, but we're not going to need them. Nobody ever comes up here but us."

"It's just...I've had this nagging." The thought hadn't let up since it started in J. Pierce Prescott's office. Almost overwhelmed him at times. Never been much of a gun man, however, if claim jumpers showed up, that's all they knew.

"Moses isn't a thief. I'm not. And you for sure aren't."

"You're speaking truth. Still, what has that got to do with anything?"

"Jethro, sir, you read it to us the other day. Whatsoever a man sows, that's what he reaps."

"Yes, we read that, what of it?" He hated this boy throwing the scriptures at him like he understood them, especially when Jethro kept getting so balled up over them. If he'd seen something though, then....

"Wouldn't you agree that we've been sowing minding our own business? So ain't we going to reap the same?"

"True." He'd figured that scripture meant you plant bad seed, that's what you get—a bad harvest. Or sow corn, you don't get beans. But maybe the boy had a point. "Still, you keep a sharp eye out. Take turns standing watch."

Elijah glanced at the boys then back. "Why you heading out like this? Was you just waiting on us to get back?"

"No." Jethro chuckled. "I'll tell you later."

"Yes, sir. How about me and the boys try out that new blasting

powder?"

He hated that idea. "They have those new fuses we been hearing about in Sacramento?"

"No, but there's something I'm hankering to try. Been thinking on a fuse of my own making. And we've got everything I'd need."

"I suppose, but use the utmost care. You hear? You get a dud, no going anywhere near the mine. Understand? Not until I get back."

"Yes, sir."

"Find something else to do. I shouldn't be gone too long."

Cody whistled then cupped his hands around his mouth. "We're done, Mister Jethro."

"What about him, sir? Want me to whip him for you?"

"No." Jethro shook his head thinking of some of his own youthful choices. "Tell him next time he stays here, and just you and Ned will go."

"Yes, sir. He'll hate that, but he don't need to be going anyway."



Forty-three days. What could he be doing? Mary closed her inventory book.

Putting it in its place, she thought back. That first note came like he promised, followed by a half-page letter two weeks later, but neither one had any sweet talk, just what things Edward wanted her to see about with the house for him. He had to return before long. She wanted to marry as soon as possible.

Oh, Lord, send him home to me.

The front door bell tinkled. Of all the people to walk into her store—Jethro Risen. And he had two dirty boys in tow.

"Morning, Mary." He looked to the bigger one. "This here's Amos." He smiled then pointed to the diminutive dirtiest urchin she ever laid eyes on, this side of her little brother. "And this young lady is Francis, but she prefers Shorty."

He reached around her brother and pulled off her cap. Greasy, matted locks fell to her shoulders.

"Hey, that's mine!" She grabbed at her hat, scowling. "I ain't no sissy girl neither! Tell him, Amos."

The boy knelt beside her then wrapped his arms around his sister. Tears ran down his cheeks. "Hush, Shorty."

Mary stood, looked from the child to Risen. "Would you be so kind as to tell me exactly what is going on here? What are you doing with these children?"

"Well, seems their father got himself killed—mining accident. And his mail-order bride lit a shuck, took everything they had. Elijah found them on the road coming home from Sacramento, and...Here we are.

She needs you, Mary.”

“Me? Why, what are you saying, Mister Risen? I am in no position to...I can’t...I already have....” The girl looked up at her, though she kept her chin tucked. Bless her precious little heart, so small. And thin.

In her eyes, the world’s weight overshadowed the glint of dare. How could she?

Then again, how could she not?

“Don’t they have anyone?”

“Might be an uncle here in San Francisco, but I figured she ought to stay here with you while we look for him.”

Every single excuse her brain invoked, after only a moment’s consideration, unraveled, leaving her nothing to stand on. Besides, getting any reason not to help past her heart would be a miracle.

Did not expect God to offer one of those to get out of caring for this little girl. What if that was her baby? Or Bonnie? Or any of her little sisters standing there scared, needing help?

“Bring her things in. She can stay for now.”

“They don’t have anything, except the clothes on their backs.”

She smiled at the poor little thing. How could someone be so hardhearted as to steal from this baby girl? “Mercy.” She glared at Risen. “First thing, you two go to Freda’s Haberdashery. She carries little girl dresses. Have Amos there run me one back, then get that boy a bath and some new clothes himself.”

Mary glanced at the little urchin, who glared and stuffed her hair back into her cap. “Don’t want no dress. If you get me anything, get me britches.”

“Make that two dresses, and bloomers, and....” She threw her hands up and turned her glare back on Risen. “Just tell Freda whatever a five or six-year-old will need. Measure her height to your leg so you’ll know her size.”

“I’m not a baby, and I hate dresses. I’m nine. Turn ten in the spring.”

“Sorry, Shorty.” No secret where she got her nickname.

Risen grinned ear to ear. “Anything else?”

“Shoes, get her a pair. You can use your hand for her shoe size. Now get a move on. I want that dress back here before her bath water gets hot.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Risen knelt, measured Shorty’s foot, stood and got her height on his leg, elbowed the boy, then backed toward the door.

Amos hesitated a moment then joined the man. “Won’t be long, Shorty.”

Miss Mattie took to the girl. Once she got the dirt off her face, she went to working on her filthy neck and fingers. “No need adding all

this dirt to your bath water.”

As ordered, her big brother returned with everything needed all wrapped up in a nice package before Mary and the old dear had the girl’s wet hair combed out. All dressed, the little angel took a spin in front of the mirror.

Her expression failed to show anything but gratitude. She glared up at Mary. “Cain’t I wear britches?”

“No, ma’am, Little Missy. Why, that’d be just disgraceful. You ought to dress like the pretty young lady you are. Why don’t you want to?”

She backed away from her image as though disgusted with the transformation. “My brother says I should act like I’m a boy, not no sissy girl.” She swiped each hand at her dress then tugged on her high neckline.

“You’re very pretty, Francis.”

She put her hands on her hips, glared hard and fumed.

For a breath Mary wasn’t quite sure, then she grinned at the little whirling dervish. “Fine, Shorty it is.”

“Good.” The corners of the girl’s mouth turned up like she’d just won some great victory. Poor little thing had no feminine graces. A month with her sisters would do wonders.

“How long has your mother been gone?”

“The real one or that mail-order lady?”

“Your only mother.”

“She died before we come west. Cholera got her. Pa said I was only knee high.”

Not bigger than Shorty was, that could have been last month, but Mary understood.

“Why don’t you and Mister Jethro live together?”

“Heavens, child. Why would you ask such a thing?”

“Ain’t you two married?”

“Absolutely not.” Mary caught Mattie grinning like a kid with a whole chocolate pie. “Whatever caused you to think such?”

The girl frowned. “The way you bossed him around. How come he lets you then if you ain’t?”

“I didn’t boss...Was I? Mercy, what can I say? Long story, Shorty.”

“He is right smart looking, and you’re so pretty. Pa says pretty men make powerful good looking young’uns.”

Mattie giggled then covered her mouth. Little miss went back to the mirror and twirled two circles. She fluffed her skirt. “Sure don’t look like no boy, do I?”

“No, you sure don’t. You’re lovely.”

She wheeled around, her lips pursed. “Pa’s new lady, she called me Francy some, you like that better than Shorty?”

“Yes ma’am, that’s a very feminine name.”

“Good, I’ll be Francy then, unless Mister Risen wants to call me something else.”



Long day, but Jethro figured a good one, except no one even knew Amos’s uncle, much less had any ideas where the man had been or gone. The boy cleaned up fine, but nothing like his sister.

If he hadn’t known her from the right height and being in Mary’s company, he wouldn’t have recognized the girl.

The little lady sure had taken to Mary, but who wouldn’t? Kind, sweet, soft-spoken—well, some of the times—and beautiful. But something was wrong with his reluctant partner.

Besides her obvious pleasure in the girl’s transformation, a sadness—or worse a pain—lurked in the depth of her eyes.

That night after he finished off his day with a long catch-up visit with Moses and Lanelle, he knelt beside his bed and recited the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. “... and glory forever and ever. Amen.” He exhaled slowly. “Thank you for putting it in Mary’s heart to take in little Francy, Lord.”

An image of the Mercantile’s proprietor strolled across his mind’s eye. Had he just replaced his desire for Meiko with a love for the beautiful widow? Did he even know the difference?

He’d wanted Meiko so bad it hurt, but he didn’t ache for Mary like that. He longed to be with her, please her, even dreamed about her, but it seemed more a slow burn.

As though required to wait for her.

Some nights, he dreamed of him and her being together on the porch, so old that about all either could do was sit the rockers and watch their grandbabies’ babies play in the yard.

His newest love was a different story. He knew exactly how he felt about Francy from the moment the Lord revealed the truth to him; he’d wanted nothing but to protect the little darling.

Somewhat the same as Mary, maybe even more. But how could he keep the widow from harm with her hating him? He wished he knew what he’d done to offend her.

Sure loved that expression on her face when he pulled the little girl’s hat off.

“What’s wrong with her, Father? Is she still in love with Caleb? Still mourning? How could that scoundrel have seduced both her and Lanelle? Help me, Lord, and show me the way.”

Afternoon of the following day, after quizzing the last storeowner in town, Amos put voice to Jethro’s concerns. “I suppose he just ain’t in San Francisco. Never knew for sure he was, but figured it was my

best shot. Sorry rascal. Why'd he say he were coming here when he weren't?"

"Don't have a clue. Any ideas?"

"No, sir. Guess it falls to me alone. If me and Sis can impose a few more days, I'll see about finding work."

Jethro put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "You can work at the Mercantile, or come on back up to the mine with me if you'd rather. I was referring to your uncle, if you'd thought of anywhere else we should look? Is there family back home we could write to?"

"No, sir. None that'd matter. If I can work at the mine, why we been hunting my kin? Thought you was looking to get rid of us."

Jethro laughed. "No. What say we go see what Francy and Miss Mary are up to?"



"Does it hurt?"

Mary rocked. "Does what hurt, sugar?"

Francy pointed at Joshua with her piece of chalk. "Him sucking on you so hard. I don't think I'd like it at all."

The girl's frankness proved a joy, if not a little uncomfortable at times.

"No, it doesn't hurt at all. Mis'ess Wingate told me that after the babies cut teeth, some might bite, but no problems yet. Joshua always gets seconds, but he's a little pig compared to Susannah."

Returning to writing her letters, she made a backward lower case 'D' then looked up again. "How come Miss Lanelle don't feed her own baby?"

"Another long story, I'm afraid."

"Is ten old enough?"

"For what, sweetheart?"

"You say long story; Amos says he'll tell me when I'm older. I'll be ten in the spring. Is that old enough to hear them long stories?"

The baby took one last sloppy suck then flopped his head back and gave her his contented little grin. She loved him true, but hated it he reminded her so of his father. She buttoned her dress and studied on her new charge.

Poor little thing had been through so much in the last month, but even more before that. Certainly no life for a child; living in a tent without enough food and a step- mail-ordered mother, while her father hunted the elusive mother lode.

"So is ten old enough?"

"Maybe. Exactly what is it you're wanting to know?" Had those words just come out of her mouth?

Francy's lips thinned. She stiffened her back and looked her

straight in the eye. "For one thing, what's a sportin' lady?"

Mercy, where had the child even heard that term? "Why is it you want to know that, sweetheart?"

" 'Cause Amos said if they found out I was a girl, they'd make me be a sportin' lady. So when Pa died, he cut off some of his old britches, and I became his little brother. I kind of liked it, though. Being a boy. Got to get dirty and stay that way. Worked hard, but it was fun." She grinned and held her hands out. "Can I hold him?"

"Really? I don't think I'd like being a boy." She rocked forward and held the baby out toward her. "Sure you can. You've got to support his head. Put him on your shoulder; he needs to be burped."

"I can do it."

Passing off the baby, Mary explained why babies needed to expel the air they'd swallowed. "If you don't, they have a tummy ache. When I was about your age, I had to help pick cotton in Texas. You ever pick any lint?"

"No, ma'am, never did. Always lived in town before Pa came out west for the gold. My gramps was a farmer though. He grew vegetables for Gram."

While the girl patted the baby's back, Mary spun one of her favorite childhood stories—the day she finally picked her weight in cotton. Francy seemed to enjoy the tale. Hopefully, she'd not press her about the evil the Lord had saved her from.

The girl's company proved so enjoyable. Evenings, after Mattie and Lanelle settled in with their husbands, had grown a bit lonely of late.

Joshua burped loud, spitting up some of his dinner on the child's shoulder. Francy laughed. "That was loud! He had lots of air in there. Good thing you threw that cloth over my nightgown."

Joining in the laughter, Mary rocked forward to help. "That's why they call it a burp rag. Serves him right for being a piglet." She wiped him clean then wrapped him in his blanket. "Would you like to carry him over to his mother?"

"Sure. Then I'll come right back. Can I sleep with you and Susannah again?"

"I don't see any reason why not. You sure can." Mary smiled, hoping her relief wasn't too apparent. The last thing she wanted to do was explain the facts of life to the innocent child.

Sooner or later, someone would have to, and it might full well fall to her. She remembered how nervous Rebecca had been when she spilled the beans.

Made her miss home.

She needed to get that letter off and tell them about Susannah.

The next day's morning started slow, then a little after dinner the Mercantile got exceptionally busy. After helping a young farmer pick

out two nice bolts of cloth with matching thread, buttons, and ribbons for his pregnant wife, she carried his selections to the counter.

Behind it, she scanned her customers. A man stood inside her door looking rather bored and somewhat aloof.

Dressed in a grey suit with a matching bowler, he wasn't a miner for sure, but no fop either. Too old for that. Out of place for certain. She finished with the farmer then walked over to the stranger.

"May I help you with something, sir?"

He smiled a rather pleasant grin, missing two bottom teeth, but hid it well. "Yes, m'lady, you certainly might if you happen to be Mis'ess Mary Wheeler. You're a fit for the description. Might you be, ma'am?"

She loved his British accent. "Yes, sir, I'm Mis'ess Wheeler. How may I help?"

He stepped toward and extended a small envelope. Edward's neat scrawl flipped her heart. She took the offering and tore it open, trying not to appear too wild with it.

Mary dearest,

Join me for supper at the Union Hotel. Please come, I have a surprise.

Love, Edward

She looked up. "That's all?"

"With your consent, m'lady, I'll call for you at half past six. The Union is less than a twenty-minute carriage ride. Mister Clinton said his last meeting should be over by seven if not earlier. Reservations have been made."

She covered her mouth with her hand, and read the note again. He signed it with love. Why hadn't he come himself? Directly? As soon as he arrived back in San Francisco? No matter his closing, being 'sent for' irritated her.

She didn't know what to say.

The Union was such a fancy hotel.

Did she have time for a bath?

What about her hair?

And he had a surprise?

Of course he had a surprise. Her engagement ring! He intended to propose at the Union, planned a wonderful evening to ask her. A good thing. Far as she was concerned, plenty enough time had passed and she was more than ready to say yes.

She needed to practice her answer.

Her heart beat double time.

"Six-thirty, you say?"

"Yes, m'lady."

The man looked harmless enough, and Edward wouldn't have sent him for her if he didn't trust him completely. She'd be in a public

place. Even her father couldn't say a word about her having supper with Edward there.

She smiled at the man. "I'll be ready then."

He bowed slightly, touched his hat's little brim, then marched out.

Chapter Nineteen



“Here, take him.”

Jethro looked over the newspaper he read. Francy held out baby Joshua; he laid the rag down on the table and took the boy. Even the little girl thought she should tell him what to do.

“Be right back.” The girl turned and ran out the front door, her new shoes clicking across the floorboards. He cradled the boy in the crook of his arm. What was going on? Where was Moses or Lanelle?

Shortly, the young lady returned with Susannah and took the chair across from him. “We’re watching the babies until Miss Lanelle gets here.”

“Why?”

“On account Miss Mary said.” Was that defiance in her eyes, as though her new mother-stand-in ruled the world? “She’s getting ready. Going to a real fancy supper at the Union Hotel. Miss Lanelle and Miss Mattie are helping her.”

At least the weaker gender spilled their guts at the drop of a hat.

“Is that so?”

The young lady shot him a knowing smirk then leaned back and nuzzled the baby. “Are you my good girl?” Almost the exact voice Mary used doing the same thing.

Apparently, the ex-boy had determined being a sissy girl a perfectly acceptable condition, at least until her big brother crossed her. To hear him to tell it, she packed a wallop that belied her diminutive size.

Jethro’s stomach soured. That fancy man must be back in town, the one Moses said was building a house up on Nob Hill. Why was Mary letting that fob turn her head?

“Mister Clinton’s carriage will be here at half past six.” Another knowing smirk, the little girl reveled in her wellspring of information.

Realization smacked him hard. “Edward Clinton?”

Francy nodded. “His man’s man is coming to fetch her.” She leaned in, curled up the corner of her top lip. “What is that anyway?”

“Hired servant, dresses nice and acts snotty, like his employer.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? And why’re you all mad all of a sudden?”

“Never mind, it’s a long story.”

She snorted. “People are always saying me that. Miss Mary promised when I’m ten, I’ll be old enough to hear all the long stories.”

Oh, really? Jethro took note to guard his words around this one from now on. “What’s Amos doing?”

“He’s helping Hank and Mister Virgil restock, sold a lot of goods today. Miss Mattie says we’re eating over there tonight. Said she’s got plenty enough for all of us.”

“Have you seen Mister Moses?”

“No, Miss Lanelle said he was still out hunting them a milk cow.”

“Well, since you appear to know everything, am I supposed to bring anything for supper?”

“Don’t know that. Want me to go find out for you?”

Jethro fished out his pocket watch with his free hand, six twenty-three. “No let’s wait.”

“Ain’t you worried?”

“About what?”

She only answered with that smirk of hers. He stood, put the timepiece back, grabbed his chair and eased it closer to the window, balancing the baby the whole way like an old hand.



Mary took the driver’s hand and stepped out. The man gestured toward the front door. “The dining room is to the left, m’lady. The staff is expecting you.”

The Union Hotel lobby dripped with crystal chandeliers and red velvet, but paled in comparison to the newer Palace. If that establishment’s interior matched its ornate exterior, maybe she and Edward should stay there on their wedding night.

The hotel’s host—what was that French word, concierge?—greeted her then escorted her to a table in a back corner.

No one in the crowded room seemed to notice or care she arrived unescorted. She got a few leers, but she got those everywhere. A waiter appeared, set two fluted wine glasses on the table, and held out a bottle in front of her. She smiled. He poured each glass half full.

Where was Edward?

Her cheeks warmed a bit. A sip of wine would be nice, but not by herself. Hadn’t she read somewhere that wine need to breathe to obtain its full flavor? How crazy was that?

“Mary, my love.” Edward took the seat directly across from her. “What a pleasure to see you again. Thank you for coming.”

His velvet baritone melted away her irritation. His love, he’d called her. She smiled. “You’re welcome. I was beginning to think you were

never coming back.” She stopped everything else she wanted to say, and left it at that. He was here now. Her wait almost over.

He held his glass out. “To successes.”

She touched her goblet to his. Successes, not love? She let a drip of wine pass her lips then set the glass down. “I take it your trip and meeting this evening went well?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

A different waiter appeared and placed a plate in front of her, a few small round pieces with some thin curly fingers, all fried crisp adorned the fancy china.

“I took the liberty, hope you like it.”

She tried one. “What is it?”

“Calamari, fried.”

It had an unusual flavor, one she’d never tasted. She swallowed another bite. “And what is calamari?”

“Fried squid. A delicacy of the Mediterranean.”

“A sea creature?” A wave of nausea set her stomach amiss. She grabbed the wine and drank more than a sip. When enough time and conversation passed, she scooted the uneaten appetizer aside.

Edward cleaned his plate of the little creatures. Would it be polite to offer him hers? Before she decided, the waiter returned and, thankfully, removed it.

Next, the man set another plate in front of her that had only half-a-palm-sized piece of gravy-covered meat and an even smaller display of mixed vegetables. They appeared hand arranged with an artist’s touch.

Lovely, but she smiled at how long the effort must have taken. At least she could tell what they were. The vegetables were perfectly steamed and seasoned.

Waiting until Edward was served and the waiter left, she ventured a question she hoped wouldn’t offend her fiancé-to-be. “I hate to sound suspect, but what meat is this?”

He laughed. A joyful sound indeed. She’d have no problem listening to that sound the rest of her life. “I noticed you didn’t finish your calamari.” He rattled off an oriental name, then grinned. “It’s beef, cow, but a very special breed from Japan.”

She tried to bring up the world map her mother had made her study, but couldn’t remember the exact location of Japan. She cut a small bite. Oh, it was heavenly. It didn’t matter where the island country was, they certainly knew how to grow some serious cow. The next course and the one after that were fun, nothing compared to the beef.

Most likely what she’d really come for wouldn’t be presented until dessert. The fabulous meal and great tasting wine? Enjoyable, except

for the nasty squid, but she wanted her surprise.

In spite of what she'd told herself, Edward poured her goblet half full for the third time. But it was a night to celebrate.

However, the evening was dragging on, and she had hungry babies to get back to. Babies! She pushed her wine away. Besides, after that last time with the brandy... She had slept great that night, but both her babies were so fussy the next day.

"You're being so quiet, Mary. What's on your mind?"

She smiled. "I was just thinking about the babies."

"How is little Susannah? She's how old now?"

"Oh, she's wonderful, the best baby in the world. Coming up on six months and growing like a morning glory."

"Babies are so cute."

How wonderful. She'd worried about his attitude toward her daughter and not really discussed it before. Good, he liked babies. And Susannah was so young, she'd never know he wasn't her real father.

Maybe she'd let Edward adopt her. She would never need to know what a...

"This, my love, is for you." He held out a small rectangular cloth-covered box, one like jewelers used.

Before dessert! Oh, thank You, Lord.

Taking it, she pried open the lid. Intertwined gold chains created a bracelet with dozens of little gold nuggets dangling all the way around. Her heart fell to the pit of her stomach. She couldn't believe it.

No diamond ring. Forget the diamond, no ring! Her face warmed. How could he?

Say something she told herself. "It's exquisite."

"Here, let me."

She gave it back. He draped it over her wrist then closed its clasp. She lifted her hand, and the lamplight danced over it.

"There's a nugget from each mine." He grinned. "We have over twenty now, counting the one I just bought."

She leaned back. No ring. No proposal. What was....

"Hopefully, that will be a little salve for you, my darling. I hate to tell you, but I must leave again for New Orleans."

"When? Why?"

"I sail in the morning. Business. I'm meeting my father there, and...." He leaned in. "I was hoping you could stay here tonight. I had Winnie book a room under your name."

"Is Winnie your man?" Her cheeks burned. They must be flaming red. Tears wet her eyes, but she blinked them back.

Oh, God, don't let them fall.

He nodded. "Winston Blackhall. He's been with my family for

years.”

She swallowed. No scene, no scene. Not right here in the Union Hotel. “Please, Edward, call Winnie and have him see me home.”

He reached out. “Mary.”

She shook her head. “Never mind. I’ll find my own way.” She stood. He jumped to his feet and hurried to her side.

“Please, dear, forget I said anything. Stay. The night’s young, and we haven’t even had dessert. I’d planned for us to go to the theater.”

“No.” She filled her lungs. “Thank you for the evening, Edward. It’s been enlightening.” She headed for the exit. He walked beside her as though nothing had happened.

Somehow, it could only have been the grace of the Lord, she held it together until Winnie closed the door behind her. Once the carriage cleared downtown’s plaza, the tear gates opened. Sobs wracked her.

He didn’t love her at all. Only wanted.... She couldn’t even form the words. Why had she thought he loved her? He only wanted.... Oh, God.... Finally, she found some control. She couldn’t go home bawling like a baby. They’d all know.

Oh, Lord, what have I done?



Sure surprised Jethro when the carriage stopped in front of the Mercantile in a cloud of dust at only eight twenty-two, pleased him though. Hopefully, her royal shortness had waited up also.

Bless Francy’s heart; he loved her compulsion to share and hoped she pried loose lots of good information on the evening.

The next morning, he decided the hour late enough and moseyed on over. Inside, all appeared normal. He maybe detected a bit of red around Mary’s eyes, but she kept her head down, seemingly absorbed in her logbook.

Was it on purpose that she never looked directly at him? He couldn’t be sure. “Good morning. Where’s Francy?”

“Helping Mattie with the babies.” She still didn’t look up.

Though he fully intended to, he could not keep his mouth shut and wait on the little girl’s report. “Have a good time last night?”

She shook her head slightly. “No.”

“Something wrong?”

She faced him glaring. She’d definitely been crying—a lot. “Yes, Mister Risen. If you must know, everything is wrong. You standing there wasting my time is wrong. I’ve got two boys now to keep busy instead of just one. And a little girl who’s a bed hog to sleep with.”

“I —”

“Not to mention Edward just got here, and now he’s leaving again

for New Orleans. He won't be back for two months, and that's just wrong." She snarled at him. "For the wrong icing to top off the wrong cake, I'm coming down with something, not feeling well at all, but there's work to do! Otherwise? I'm just peachy keen." She sighed and returned to her cyphering.

"I'm sorry. Big fight last night?"

Glaring, she looked back at him. That might have been steam coming out her ears. "Sir, is there something you need? Perhaps you'd possibly get the grand idea to.... Leave. Me. Alone. "

"Yes, I do need something. I am sorry to be a bother, but I'm going to Sacramento."

"Good. Take Amos with you."

"You sure? He's not helping?"

"Of course he is. He's a good worker. Take him! Leave him! I. Don't. Care."

"Best he stay I guess. For Francy's sake."

She turned her bloodshot eyes on him and stared hard. "Please, Mister Risen, just go. Amos and Francy are fine. Go to Sacramento—or the moon—or wherever! I don't care. Leave me alone. Please."

He backed to the door and offered a smile, but she missed it completely. He turned around and walked out. Him and his big mouth. She hated him now more than ever. At least Clinton was going to be gone two months. That was great news.

Oh, Lord, make a way. Soften that woman's heart, and give me the desires of mine.

Chapter Twenty



The little girl leaned against the loading dock's wall and snuggled in against his leg. "I don't want to you to go."

"I know." Jethro hated it that he shot his mouth off about Sacramento. Now instead of a quick trip to the mine, he had to go to the capital. "I'll be back in a few weeks."

Francy toed his boot with her new shoes that already needed a scrubbing. "Why can't I go with you?"

"You need to stay here. Help Miss Mary and Miss Lanelle with the babies."

She beamed. "We could take them."

"What about Miss Mary feeding them?"

"We can wait until Mister Moses buys a cow, and..." She pursed her lips. "Do you know how to milk a cow?"

"No, do you?"

Smiling what he could only call a sneaky one, she tilted her head. "Maybe Miss Mary could go."

"No, she has to run the store."

"Hank can do it, him and Amos and Mister Virgil and Miss Mattie. That's plenty." She held out her hands as if it was all settled, made perfect sense. Except it was the beautiful widow he needed to get away from.

"We best leave it like it is, little lady. Maybe you can go next time."

"Is that a promise?"

"No, and don't you dare say it is."

"Yes, sir."

The boys finished loading and went to tying the tarp over the goods. He knelt down. "You be good now, hear."

"Yes sir."

"If you need anything, ask Mister Moses. He's a soft touch."

She nodded, kissed his cheek, then ran inside. Poor baby girl, as though she could not possibly stand watching him ride off. Little thing had been through too much already, and here he was running off. Shame Mary wasn't out there begging him not to go.



A man walked by leading a Clydesdale. Mary leaned forward from her desk. Moses Jones? What in the world would he be doing with a draft horse? Risen and Jones were legally her partners, no matter how distasteful and grating.

But she ran the Mercantile, made the rules at her store, and bought the stock. No one else has the authority to buy or order.

Totally against any breathing stock—not that she didn’t love animals—she might just mosey over to the front window. No partnership would keep her from going to see for herself the goings on.

If she chose at some part to get into livestock, goats would be much more desirable than any overgrown horses, no matter how much she admired the beautiful beasts.

She stood. The front door’s bell tinkled.

“Good morning, ma’am.” The man smiled, while his name eluded her. He’d been in a time or two; maybe Virgil knew. She used to be so good with names.

“Yes, it certainly is. Good to see you again. Is there something I can help you find?”

Was that a lie? On one side, the nausea from that dreadful squid had subsided.

And Risen was leaving town. But she hated it that Edward—

“Looking to buy me a couple pair of those new trousers if you got any. Uh, no, they’re more like... Made out of a blue tent canvas or something like that. Everyone that’s got a pair sure swears by them.”

“No, sir, I haven’t heard about them. Do you know who manufactures them? I can certainly order some for you. Be happy to.”

“No, ma’am, don’t rightly know. Wish I could remember what they’re calling them.” He tipped his hat. “Thanks anyway.” Then didn’t let the door him on the way out.

New blue trousers, huh? She best find out about them.

Menswear had proved to be one of her best sellers. She strolled to the back of the store and made a quick check. No one had snuck in on her.

She stepped into the storeroom. Empty; she eased out to the loading dock. Amos and Hank stood in the alleyway, waving toward the street.

“Hank.”

Both boys spun around. The older one threw her a nod. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Come inside and watch the store. You, too, Amos. Don’t let anyone sneak in on you.”

The boys hurried toward her. She extended her hand and stopped Amos. He grinned. "Ma'am?"

"Where's Francy?"

"Miss Mattie's got her sitting the corner."

"What'd she do?"

The boy unbuttoned his shirt, revealing an angry red spot. "Slugged me. Miss Mattie saw it and put her in the bad girl chair. Said she had to stay there until she apologized. I ain't expecting that anytime soon. That girl is powerful stubborn."

"Why'd she hit you?"

"Told her to stop being a baby just 'cause Mister Jethro was leaving out."

She nodded toward the front. "Well, go help Hank. And keep an eye peeled."

"Yes, ma'am."

She hopped off the dock, held her skirt up a few inches out of the dirt, and walked out to the street. Risen and Jones were nowhere to be seen. Had Moses gone with him? She walked across the thoroughfare, dodging traffic, then climbed the stairs to the boardwalk and tapped on the old barbershop's front door. She went on in, not like the men were in there.

Rather sparse inside. How long had her cousin-by-marriage lived there now? Could it be two months?

Shamed her some that she hadn't been across the street to visit, see how Lanelle was living. But she stayed so busy between the store and the babies.

A folding screen hid all but the foot of a single bed. An old desk sat dead center of the room with four chairs. The old barber chair still sat in front of a big mirror, as though waiting for the next customer.

Not exactly Spartan, but a person would think the man would have acquired a few more creature comforts.

"Mary?"

A bit startled, she looked up. Lanelle stood in the back doorway. "There you are."

"Well this is a first. What are you doing over here?"

"Being nosey, mostly." She gave her a big smile though and hoped it fooled her only kin in the whole of California. It definitely hadn't come from her heart. "Saw Moses with a monster horse, but a customer came in. I missed getting to ask him about it. Figured you'd know."

Her cousin smiled. "Oh, he's headed up to the mine, bought the horse to ride. Said it was the first animal he ever felt comfortable climbing up on. He's wanting to have Elijah and the boys work on our cabin some, get it ready for the baby before we go back home."

“Oh, really? I didn’t know you were thinking of leaving anytime soon. He found a cow then?”

“Not yet. But that’s another reason he wanted to go. Someone told him about a farmer who keeps goats. He wanted to see if he had any freshened. He’ll be back in three or four days.” She stepped back. “Got time for a sit down? I’ve got coffee on.”

The no turned into a why not. She should be neighborly. Once settled in the good-sized kitchen—Lanelle had made it so homey—such a contrast from Risen’s quarters.

“Where’s Francy? Haven’t seen her this morning.”

“Mattie’s making her sit in the corner. She hauled off and slugged her brother right in front of the old dear.”

“Oh no, what was that all about?”

She told her the story then shook her head. “Apparently, little miss has decided she wants Risen to be her daddy.”

“She could do worse. So could you.”

“Don’t start that. I’ve got trouble enough with him telling me what to do, and we’re only partners. Edward’s off again. To New Orleans this time. Says he’ll be gone at least two months.”

“I’m sorry. I know you’ll surely be glad when he doesn’t have to travel so much. Why is he going?”

“Meeting his father for some business deal. Actually, I didn’t ask much after that, I got so mad with him for leaving again. Well, that wasn’t the only thing that upset me.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the bracelet. “Look what he gave me.”

Lanelle’s eyes widened, obviously impressed. Her mouth formed a circle. “Oh, my! Let me see that.”

Mary dropped it into her palm. “There’s a nugget from each of his mines. Says he has over twenty now.”

“It’s so pretty. And unusual. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“I haven’t either. I was hoping...” A wad of cotton in her throat suddenly stopped her, and her eyes popped full of tears. She lowered her gaze, no need to wish. She still wasn’t even sure herself if she loved the man or he loved her.

He wrote it on his note, but had only said it once. And that was at his house while...

Lanelle handed the bracelet back. “What were you hoping?”

“I don’t know. Men. They all need to be taken out and shot.”

Lanelle giggled then hiked her eyebrows up and down. “Not my Moses, he’s a keeper.” She got up and headed for the coffee pot then topped off both cups. “I’ve never known you to lie though. I believe you do know what you were hoping for.”

“Thank you, cousin. So I take it your dear husband’s all healed

up?"

"Oh, yes." She bit her bottom lip and wagged her head. "That man..."

Mary didn't want to hear any more, didn't want to be jealous of Lanelle. She'd already fought that battle. She'd dodged admitting she expected an engagement, and searched for another direction.

Her belly rolled, she swallowed until the sweet turned sour. "Would you do me a huge favor?"

"Sure, if I can."

"Show Hank where Miss Ling lives."

"Of course, why?"

"Oh, I've picked up something. Probably that nasty squid I ate before I knew what it was, but I've been feeling sick, and I hate throwing up." She closed her eyes, and for a split second relived those horrible five days on the Philadelphia. "Miss Ling makes a tea that really helps. But I do not want to take a chance on seeing her daughter."

"That's understandable."

"I was thinking if you and Hank drove by and you pointed it out, then we could send him there whenever."

"I can do that, but I don't mind going myself, anytime you need something."

"Really?"

"Not at all." Lanelle took a sip of her coffee. "I hate throwing up, too. I mean I'll do about anything to keep from it. Bless the Lord, I didn't...uh...never mind, sorry. Uh..."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I forgot. That's the trouble with lies. You have to remember how things weren't, what you've claimed was that wasn't."

"Now you're talking riddles." She laughed. "Spit it out. What'd you forget?"

Her face reddened, and she stared at her cup. "It was nothing."

"Who's lying? What lie?"

"On the Philadelphia, Mary. I wasn't seasick."

"Oh." Realization dawned bright, and she gagged.

"You need a bowl?"

"Oh God, I hope not." She covered her mouth until the wretched wave subsided. "That man was such a..."

"Yes, he was."

Though she knew she shouldn't, a part of her wanted to know the truth. The whole truth. Besides, what could it hurt now? Wasn't like she didn't have to look at Caleb and Lanelle's little indiscretion every time she held Joshua to her breast. "Is that when it started?"

Shaking her head slightly, Lanelle studied her coffee cup.

Mary's heart bled a tear. "When then?"

Lanelle leaned back, her mouth drawn up into a pained grimace. "You really want to know it all? Isn't it best to leave it be?"

"No, seeing that China Doll woman in the flesh helped. I'd made her out to be more than she was, and..." She scrunched her shoulders and hugged herself. "Surely Moses has told you the Bible says the truth will set you free."

As though she'd been holding her breath, Lanelle exhaled long and slow. "I was fourteen when he'd stole a bottle of his daddy's home brew. He was sixteen. After we drank too much, we crawled up into the hay loft."

Her indiscretion with Edward had started with alcohol. She was seeing now why her mother called the stuff liquid evil.

Had Susannah Abbott Baylor drank too much when she was young? No, her Andrew was a good man, then she always had Levi and Rebecca. No time for vices.

"After that, from then on, well, we'd get together whenever we could." Tears welled in her cousin's eyes. The pain overflowed and ran down her cheeks, screwed her face to ugly and hurt. "I'm so sorry, Mary. I hated you. Stupid to think if I gave him a baby, he'd leave you, and..." She sobbed. "I was such an idiot. I'd been so careful all those years, then..."

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't swallow, and she needed to. Wetness rolled down her face. She gasped and jumped to her feet. She knelt beside Lanelle. "We can't change the past. And how could we live without Joshua or Susannah? He can't hurt either one of us any more..."

Her own tears flowed hot as she hugged her cousin. Lanelle slipped off her chair and hugged Mary tight. For the longest, she and her only friend sat in the floor and sobbed. When the pain eased, Mary leaned back. "I love you."

Sniffling, Lanelle wiped her cheeks. "I love you, too." She snickered. "You're certainly not the snotty princess I once thought you were."

"Princess?" She chuckled. "Why'd you think I was a princess?"

"You've got to be kidding. Everyone in Red River Valley knows all you Buckmeyers are royalty, heirs to the throne. Why, your daddy owns half the valley. And he's so good looking, and you're all so pretty and handsome. At first, I wanted to be Rebecca. John was so smitten with her. Then when Caleb started courting you and told me he was going to marry -"

"When was that?"

"Right before he started going to the Methodist Church."

"You mean he planned it all along?"

She nodded. "But in Jefferson, right before you got there, he told me he loved you."

"You and he were in Jefferson together?"

"Yes, I was praying you'd get there early or not come at all, but he wouldn't let me wait and see. Made me ride with the whiskey." She snapped her fingers. "I just remembered. I've still got a jug of Texas Gold at the mine. Man, an Irish coffee sure would be good right about now."

Mary stood and extended her hand then helped Lanelle to her feet. She hugged her again, good and long then wiped her cheeks. "Wow, what a morning. I certainly didn't plan... Thank you for being honest with me."

"I'm the one most grateful for you not hating me. I'll never be able to repay you or thank you enough for taking such good care of Joshua."

"Oh, you shouldn't have mentioned our little piglet." She held her arm tight against both breasts. "Here comes dinner, I best run."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to." Lanelle laughed.

"Come on, maybe we can sweet talk Mattie into letting Francy out of the corner."

She slipped her hand into Mary's. "Don't you just love that little scalawag?"

Chapter Twenty-One



The ferryman waved him up. Easing the team onto the barge, Jethro whoa'd the mules inches from the wagon in front of him, set the brake, then tied off the reins. His partner walked the Clydesdale up next to him.

He wagged his head at his friend. "That beast weighs more than both these mules; probably eats twice as much, too."

"I don't care. I like him. First horse I ever sat that didn't even notice me on his back."

"Why didn't you buy a saddle?"

"Couldn't find one big enough."

"Want to try that livery the other side of Marin?"

"Bare back is fine. Done it plenty when we worked Clinton's Ditch."

"How long ago was that? And those were mules, and, you walked a lot, too. Let's stop and check. They might have an oversized saddle or know a maker who can customize one for you."

"You love spending our coin."

He held his hands out. "What's it for if not to spend." He glanced around. No one paid any attention. "We've got plenty my friend, and I don't want you bouncing off that giant and breaking your head open." He leaned closer. "Besides, no telling how much more Elijah and the boys have dug."

"Fine, we'll stop, but I'd like to hurry. Get there and get back. I'm already missing Lanelle and Josh."

Jethro didn't respond, missing Mary, too. He sighed. Not that she cared one whit that he'd left. Go on, go to the moon. I don't care. That's what she'd told him. A small cloud of fog drifted by, then a small hole opened. A bridge loomed over his head. He stared, amazed at the site. Twined iron or steel cable climbed high into the sky from the passage.

But how could anyone make that much steel? And instead of rock arches, the roadway hung from the colossal metal ropes. The hole closed. "When? How?" The fog bank drifted by, but left only blue sky.

"When what?"

Jethro shook his head. "Nothing. I thought... Did you see a

bridge?" A shiver scabbled up his spine.

"No, I did not."

What had that been about? A bridge from San Francisco to Sausalito? Impossible. Ridiculous. Even with ten Roman Legions and all of Caesar's engineers, he couldn't build a span like he'd just seen. Had it only been in his mind's eye? Seemed so real.

"And you can forget a bridge, partner. Elijah and I ain't building no bridge. The ferry's fine, just fine."

Jethro laughed. "I'm not wanting you to."

"Know what we do need to build? A dairy. We can find us some Holsteins or Jerseys and every morning, let the ladies fill buckets with their milk. Aye, we're talking liquid gold."

Suddenly, like a dense fog bank rolled across his mind's eye, he witnessed a horde of children milking and tending a long row of cows. Some of the children he even recognized from his dreams, but instead of playing in the yard, they worked in the dairy barn. "Where?

"Where what?"

"Would you want to build it?"

"Build what?"

"You left your brain back with your wife and son, didn't you?" Jethro punched his shoulder. "The dairy. It would have to be out a ways, yet close enough to get the milk and butter to town."

"Are you serious?"

"I am. Matter of fact, I've been dreaming about it, though didn't realize it until just now."

"Have we got enough money? So far the only cows I've found, they want a small fortune for. Where would we ever find a whole herd for the right price?"

"New York has plenty."

"New York?" Moses shoved him back. "Now who's left their brain where? Tell me how you're going to get a herd across the country to California?"

"Don't know, but there's a way. Let's do it."

Before his friend answered, the barge slowed then drifted into the far bank. Moses patted his horse's neck and talked to him as though the moose could understand, then he turned sideways and smiled.

"Before or after the bank?"

"We can do both."

"You sure?"

He nodded, though not completely sure. He had no idea what either would cost or exactly how much gold lay in the bank or the mine. But God did, and his father would know how much he needed to open a bank. Could he even stand looking at the man long enough to find out? Much less heeding his advice? If he still even lived.

A dairy. Where would he start? And how would Moses and Lanelle react when he told them the rest of it? Raising your wife's son by her dead cousin... That was one thing. But how would his friend feel about a passel of other people's urchins?



Mary knelt beside the little girl sitting on a stool facing the wall. "Supper's ready."

"Ain't hungry." Francy continued to stare at the corner.

"What do you suppose Mister Jethro would say about you being so stubborn?"

"He ain't here."

"Did you know that's not a word?"

She turned. "Is so. Didn't ya hear? I just said it twice."

"Silly Francy, that doesn't make it a word. It has to be in the dictionary. Ain't isn't."

She looked at her lap. "Amos shouldn't of said nothing. He don't care about anything or nobody."

"Mister Jethro said he'd be back."

She snorted then shook her head. "Why should he come back? You hate him."

Her words pushed Mary back. "No, I do not. Why would you say such a thing?"

"On account of the way you treat him. You're always being mean and bossing him around."

"Frances Boyd! I do not."

She gave her a knowing smirk. "Sure do. He loves you, and you just make him feel bad every time he's around."

Mary jerked back, studied the girl a minute, then leaned in close. "Did he say that?"

"Heavens no. You think he'd tell a little girl that? But I see how he looks at you. Just like Pa looked at that lady he ordered in the mail."

How could she explain the difference between love and desire to a nine-year-old. "You are wrong, you know, and you shouldn't say I hate him."

Francy raised a shoulder. "I've heard how mean you talk to him. It wouldn't be no wonder if he done left and never comes back."

When had the girl overheard her? Thinking on it, she hadn't been too kind to the man. But mercy, he constantly infuriated her something terrible. Well, she'd have to watch her tone after he got back.

"I tasted a little piece of Miss Mattie's roast. Sure hate for you to miss that. And you know Amos loves you. You need to tell him you're

sorry.”

“I didn’t hit him that hard anyway.”

“Pretty hard, I saw the red spot.”

“He should be the one has to apologize.” Francy swung her feet, then looked over sideways smiling. “If I do, will you promise to be nice to Mister Jethro?”

“Of course. That’s an easy promise.”

She nodded and jumped off the stool. “Good, cause I want him to be my pa and you for my ma.” The girl kissed her cheek then ran into the kitchen. “Amos, I’m sorry I hit you so hard that it hurt your sissy self.”

“Fraaanceeey...”



Jethro extended his hand. “Deal?”

The man shook his head. “No, two eighty, coin or dust.”

“Seventy.”

“Five.”

“You’re a hard man, but deal.”

The old boy grinned, spit in his palm then extended it. Jethro did the same. Why not? When in Rome and all.

Moses handed him the money belt. “Shake a leg, we can make another ten miles today.”

A good deal. Nice mare, better buggy. Instead of pushing on, he’d prefer to stay the night. Hard tack and jerky didn’t have near the appeal of a store-bought meal, nor the hard ground to a bed, but Moses wouldn’t hear it.

Seemed all the man could think about was getting back to Lanelle. How could Jethro blame him though? If Mary waited for him with open arms, he’d probably never have even left in the first place.

More like twelve miles before Moses pulled the new rig off the road. Jethro stopped the wagon, leaving a good ten feet between the two. Half hour after last light before everything was done: animals grained, watered, and hobbled, harness hung out to dry, firewood gathered and kindled.

If he hadn’t shot his mouth off, but then he didn’t like the idea of Moses falling off that huge horse, riding bareback. And he did get a great deal on the horse and buggy. Much better knowing his partner rode on springs. Hadn’t been that long since he almost got blown to kingdom come.

Plus, this way, he couldn’t argue leaving Goliath at the mine to skid wood.

Moses handed him a big chunk of jerky. “Want to switch tomorrow?”

"No need, the wagon isn't that bad."

"Suit yourself. We could tie them all to the buggy."

"No, it's uphill most of the way, tying that Clydesdale to the back of the buggy is one thing, those mules pulling a load would be another."

Moses tossed him a hunk of bread. "Lanelle baked it yesterday. It's better hot, but it aint' too bad."

"Thank her for me. She send anything else? Some of that apple pie maybe?"

The big man laughed. "No, her pies don't last long enough to get sent anywhere."

Jethro scooted back and leaned against the wagon's wheel. "You like children, right?"

"Aye, like the wee boogers fine so long as I don't have to change the babies after they dirty themselves." He shivered. "Have you smelled...?" He grabbed his nose. "Phewee, I don't know how the women folk stand it. Gags me all the way to my big toes."

"I agree." Except he really didn't know. The thought in the abstract alone proved bad enough to be in agreement with the man. "Besides that though, you like them. The older ones? Like Francy."

"Sure, what is it you're getting at?"

"An orphanage."

"What?"

"A home. For all the orphans. You've seen them on the streets. It's where Amos and Francy would be if not for Elijah coming up on them. Her passing as a boy."

"Look Jethro, this morning it was a bridge. Then a dairy. And you've been talking about a miners' bank for a month now. How many ways are you wanting to spend our gold?"

"The dairy was your idea. I just saw it as a place where we could keep the little darlings. There'd be plenty of milk, and the older ones could help."

"Are you serious?"

"I am. Been dreaming about it. It's wild, Moses, like the dreams aren't from my own making. And sometimes, I hear things. The children can work, and besides the cows, we can have crops. If we set it up right, the place will support itself, and God's children will have a better life, be safe."

"All this because of Francy and Amos?"

"Maybe. Brother Paul is doing what he can, but feeding all those urchins a bowl of soup a day and reading to them from the Bible isn't like having a real roof over their heads. Or learning how to work, get ready for life in the real world after they're grown."

Moses nodded. "Suffer the little children to come unto me."

“Exactly. That’s the same scripture that came to my mind when Elijah brought Amos and Francie to the mine. Well, not like I thought of it myself, more as if something inside spoke it. But into my head, not my ears. You ever had that happen?”

“Aye, often the Lord speaks. Good Book says His sheep know His voice.” The man stretched out his long legs and rested against the wheel. “But I ain’t going back to New York, so you best figure out somewhere else to get them cows, unless you’re willing to go it alone.”

“I will find them one way or another. What do you think Lanelle will say?”

“Oh, we both want to get out of town; we love the solitude the mountains offer, we do. Running a dairy sounds like a challenge enough. Throw in a bunch of scalawags....”

Jethro hopped up and tossed another piece of deadfall on the fire. “But she’ll go for it?”

“You know how to milk a cow?”

“No, but how hard can it be?”

“What about the bank? You sure we can do both?”

“I am.”

“Your old man teach you anything about banking before he went and lost all his money?”

“Not much, but some.”

A long silence ensued.

“Tell me true now, Jethro, do you also want to build that bridge you saw?”

“No. I don’t know what that was all about, but no. Caesar and all his men couldn’t build what I saw, and he had over ten legions.”

“Good, you take the first watch. I’m bushed. Lanelle kept me up late last night.” He stretched out, not waiting for a response.

Not soon enough, time came to wake Moses, but sleep did not come easy. Been too much talk, too many thoughts of this father. Would he be waiting in the shadows of his slumber? Him and his lame excuses for gambling away the money, killing his mother same as if he’d poured the poison down her throat.

Served the old leech right, having to stand in front of that extravagant hotel opening doors for the people he wouldn’t have given the time of day to before.

FORGIVENESS

Jethro’s eyes came open. A million stars twinkled down. The pain in his heart as fresh as the day he’d found her so cold and stiff. The lifeless stare in his mother’s eyes, even now, still bore into his soul. Then as realization crept in, the pain dulled and slipped back into its hidey hole in his heart.

FORGIVE HER REUEL

Chapter Twenty-Two



“One night in town.” Jethro eyed the boy hard.

“Yes, sir.” Elijah grinned.

“Sign those papers first thing, and get them to the clerk. I’m sure the man keeps banker hours.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jethro glared at Ned, shook his head, then pointed at him. “Don’t mess up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Moses laughed then slapped the reins over the mules’ back. “See you in a couple of weeks.”

“Take care, partner. Have Lanelle bake me a pie.”

He leaned out and smiled. “Wouldn’t do you any good. I’d eat it ’fore it made its way up the mountain.”

The wagon topped the first ridge and rolled out of sight. Jethro strolled back to the woodpile. Cody swung the axe, split off a quarter of the slab, then stood the eighteen-inch piece back onto the stump. He looked up. “Ain’t right. Ned getting to go. We ain’t even been back a month yet.”

“What’s that got to do with you?”

“Just saying, it weren’t fair. Thought we went to town once a month. Ned didn’t need to go. He never wants to do nothing fun anyway.”

“Drinking and whoring your idea of fun?”

The boy smiled. “Yes, sir. Uh... No, sir. Uh, I mean no, them ain’t no fun. They’s mortal sins.”

What was he going to do with this one? “Stack what you’ve got split then come help me work on Moses’ cabin.”

“Yes, sir.” He took off his hat. “What’s those papers Elijah had to sign? You and Mister Moses selling out?”

“No. We traded some holdings with the Wingates, and the new county clerk wanted Elijah to sign off on the deal.” He held a hand up. “Long story, but we’re swapping some of our interest in the Mercantile for their old barbershop.”

“Why? Ain’t that store making loads of money?”

“It is indeed. Miss Mary’s doing wonders with it, but we’ve got

plans for the barbershop.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

Jethro shook his head. “No, you don’t. I’m not standing here yapping with you all day. We’ve got work to do. Now shake a leg, boy.”

Cody jammed his hat back on and grinned. “Yes, sir.”

Just before last light, Jethro got the room addition laid out and squared. Moses and his misses penciled it all out on paper, but the doing proved harder, especially without his friend’s help.

The boy seemed plenty strong and eager enough, but with no experience, he probably hindered more than he helped.

The next day Jethro rolled the first course of timber in place. Then he and the boy spent the following morning felling more trees and skidding them close. Apparently, that monster horse loved labor. Jethro never even had to raise his voice.

He’d have paid double what Moses gave for the animal if he’d have known how good the Clydesdale worked. The third day proved even better. Rolled two courses in place.

The boy took to cabin raising. Maybe carpentry was his calling. Sure seemed to enjoy it.

Reminded Jethro of when he and Moses worked the canal. Having each other made the days fly by, except now he bent the boy’s ear about the Lord’s salvation, instead of the other way around.

Hopefully, it wouldn’t take Cody so long to find redemption.

A couple of hours past dinner of the fourth day, Elijah and Ned returned. Finished the last two courses with extra help. Tickled him that Francy had sent him a letter. Poor little darling.

She sure needed help with her spelling and grammar, but the way she signed it made him want to head straight back to San Francisco. He read it again.

Dere Mistr Jethro,

We ar all doing finn. I ben doing lettrs and working hrd keeping tha babees hapee when thae aint eeting. Amos is deing biferclt but I be tring not to hit him xcpt it is hrd. Mis Maddee sas hi I do not like Hanck he bes meen to me. Can I tel hem yuu wil wup hem win yuu git bak? Hop so caz I don did. I ben taking to God lik yuu sed asking hem to mak Mis Mary luv yuu as much as I do

And for yuu to de my pa and hr to de my ma decuz a grl neeb pernts. I neeb yuu. I luv yuu. Yer dater if God sas yes. Francy

Couldn’t make himself out to be a liar though. He told Mary he had to go to the capital, and he wanted to get Brother Paul more Bibles quicker than she could get a case delivered. Imagined the priest could give away as many as he got to him.

That night after beans, jerky, cornodoggers, and some scripture

reading, Elijah invited him outside. "Cabin's looking good, sir."

"Think you'll have any problem with the roof?"

"Shouldn't. You don't have to stay. You and Cody did the hard part."

"Good, then I'll leave first thing tomorrow."

Elijah leaned in close. "The dust we carried in weighed out at nine thousand, six hundred and four dollars."

"Excellent, you get a weight on the nuggets?"

"Yes, sir, watched them mark 'em and put this keg with the others."

"Good." He kept nodding.

"That dude—the bank's big gun—he asked after you and Moses."

"Did he now? Say any more?"

"Not really, just being friendly."

"Men like J. Pierce are never just anything. Did I tell you he offered to buy the mine?"

"No, sir."

"Be careful around bankers. The ones I've known worship at the altar of greed."



Mary pulled her knees up and bent over. Her tummy rolled. She swallowed twice, then the nausea eased some, hung on for a few more minutes, then vanished. "Stupid squid. Will I ever be over them? Or that night?"

The sound of her own voice shattered the silence and startled her. Why was she talking to herself? She waited, being as still as she could. When the sourness didn't return, she rolled out of bed.

Susannah and Francy didn't move. Good. A few minutes to herself would be nice. She peeked in on Amos and Joshua. The almost-man-sized lump cuddled into the covers on the bed in what had once been her sitting room.

They rose and fell with each breath the boy took.

In his crib, Joshua lay on his back, his little mouth working on his dream breakfast. What would she do when they took her baby boy from her? Mercy, she had him more than they had. He was...

She must stop thinking that way. He wasn't hers. She eased out and down the stairs; Mattie and Virgil sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Both looked toward her and smiled. "Good morning." The old dear gestured behind Mary.

"Yes, it is." The ten-year-old stood at the bottom of the stairs.

She turned around. "So, how long have you been awake?"

Francy shrugged. "Since before you curled up in a ball. What's stupid squid?"

“Something I promise you I will never eat again. They live in the ocean, a little like an octopus.”

“You ate it!” The horrified expression on the little lady told the story. She’d never eat it either. “Why’d you do it?”

“Already chewed and swallowed before I knew what it was. It made me sick to my stomach almost immediately.”

“Who fed it to you?”

“That isn’t important.”

“Long story?”

“Yes, ma’am. Want some coffee?”

“Can I have some honey with it?”

Mary looked to Mattie, who raised one shoulder slightly, then back to the girl. “Two spoonfuls.”

“Thanks.”

Coffee then breakfast, followed by another workday. She loved the store, battling wits with the customers, loving it when she won, but hating it all to blue blazes when she let someone beat her down too far. Even with the constant flow of traffic, the days dripped by like molasses in the winter.

When would Edward get himself back?

She tried to remember how long before he returned, but the weeks had run together. She should have written it down.

“Here. How’s this?” Francy held out a piece of paper.

Mary rolled her new chair away from her desk, took the offering, and read. Halfway down, she held it out and pointed. “What’s that word?”

Francy leaned in. “Hmmm, what does it look like to you?”

“Well, benintiredleeto... Do you remember what you were saying? Right before, read it. Start about here.” She pointed to the paper.

“It says, ‘It has already been two weeks since you left and you said you would not be gone that long.’” Her eyes sparkled and lit up the whole room. “Oh, yeah, I remember now. Entirely! That’s what it says.”

“Excellent.”

“I was telling him it’s been entirely too long, and he needed to get hisself back because I miss him too much. Guess I didn’t leave enough spaces.”

“I suppose not; without them, your words run together. Try to remember.”

“I will. Ain’t you hankering for him to get back, Miss Mary?”

“Some, be nice to stop hearing you harping on him being gone all the time, I can tell you that for certain.”

With a sly grin, Francy moseyed over next to her and twirled a loose curl around her finger. “Oh, you’ve got the prettiest hair. Ain’t

you just a little tiny bit wanting to see his handsome self?"

Mary pursed her lips and wagged her head, smiling at the girl's blatant attempt at matchmaking, but how could she argue? Risen was not hard to look at, that she freely admitted—well, not aloud—but his arrogance. Now that galled her. "Want me to put this letter with the others?"

"Yes'm. Can I go now? Me and Susann got plans."

"Oh, you do. What are y'all up to?"

"If I'm done with my letter writing, then we're going over to Miss Lanelle's and have high tea. Josh and Mister Moses ain't invited. It's only us girls and not Amos or Hank either."

"Go on then, wouldn't want to keep you from high tea." She rolled back to her desk and put the missive in the drawer on top of the letter she'd started so long ago but still hadn't finished.

Nicked her heart some that she wasn't invited, but then they all knew she had a business to run.

Four days and as many letters later, the man Francy wanted for a daddy rolled into town in the new buggy he and Moses had bought. She had heard all about it by way of the little one-girl-herald.

Then to celebrate his return from Sacramento, he insisted everyone go to supper with him. Beside herself, Francy's excitement was so cute and infectious. Mary couldn't help but catch some of it.

In the three-block walk to the restaurant, Francy worked hard at getting and keeping Jethro and Mary next to each other. She finally gave up for the girl's sake and stayed by the man's side.

After all, no need to be rude. Her partner deserved a little civility from her, being in business together and all. Even if she'd preferred not to be, facts were facts, and her mother would surely roll over in her grave if she could watch from Heaven and see Mary be rude for no reason.

By the same token, Mama didn't like being bossed either, and arrogance got her hotter than Texas in July. Still it didn't cost anything to be nice.

Good food, and news of the capital, Jethro buying half-interest in a newspaper. And more than that, arranging for the man to print Bibles—all he could produce. Some both testaments and others with just the Psalms and New Testament.

Maybe Jethro Risen had truly changed, turned over a new leaf.

"Now that the Bibles are in the works, Mary, there's one more thing I'd like to do, and I sure could use you help."

She gave him a little smile. "What would that be, Mister Risen?"

"Moses and I want to start an orphanage. We'd like for you to be its business manager."

Had she just heard right? "An orphanage? And you want me to run

it?"

"Not the day to day operations, but yes, ma'am, the business part of it. You're the best I know, man or woman. We'll do it all up legal. I'm committing half of my mine stock to it. You will be compensated, of course. What do you say?"

She covered her mouth. What should she say? Why was he doing this? "Mercy, this is certainly out of the blue. I had no idea." Dumbfounded, she attempted to unscramble her thoughts. "I just don't know. Exactly how would it work?"

"We want to have a dairy farm, out a ways from town but close enough to haul milk and butter back to sell. We'd be teaching the children along the way; to read and write, how to work, you know, integrity and honesty. Give the little darlings a roof over their heads, three meals a day."


"Impressive. You've definitely given the idea lots of thought."

"Hopefully, it'll pay its own way, but more than anything else, we'll show them God's love and teach them His ways."

Mercy, had she totally misjudged the man? How could she not agree to help?

Oh, Lord, am I doomed to be yoked with Jethro Risen for the rest of my days?

Chapter Twenty-Three



With the added work of the orphanage, days piled on top of each other for Mary, good ones though. The further they got into it, the more excited everyone got, even her. Her stomach had settled, finally got that stupid squid out of her system, though a few times, she'd thought she'd felt a flutter in her tummy. But the skies over her shone sunny and blue.

Plus, all the extra work helped her not to dwell on Edward's absence.

How had Risen done it? Entangled everyone in his web? He bought the Wingates with a piece of the Mercantile. Elijah with a share of the mine. And now her with the children's home. Little Francy with his love and doting. Oh, it certainly tickled her how much those two loved each other.

Poor baby, latched onto the first man who came along after her father got himself killed, but Mary understood about a girl loving a strong man. She closed her eyes and thought of home. Oh, why didn't Daddy write? How could he hate her so much? Men and their stupid pride.

"Can I, Miss Mary?"

She shrugged. "Yes, you may, but tell me why you want to go. It's only a piece of property."

Francy grinned. "Thought maybe you could come, too. We could have a picnic. Miss Mattie said she'd be happy to pack us a dinner, and Hank and Amos and Mister Virgil can run the store, except..."

Mary exhaled. Bless the little darling's heart, she wanted so badly for her and Risen to fall in love, but... "Except what?"

The girl wrinkled up her nose then smiled rather sheepishly. "Me and Mister Jethro thinks you shouldn't open the store at all on a Sunday anyways."

"Say Jethro and I; putting yourself first isn't right. Sounds like mean Mister Jethro."

Her little hands went to her hips and she glared. "Mister Jethro is not mean! Why there's not a mean bone in --"

"I didn't say he was. You said me and him, and that sounds like mean him. Putting the other person first, ahead of yourself, gives them

respect and honor. That's all I was saying."

"Oh." The girl held her hands out and smiled. "Yes, ma'am, you said put the other person first and that is right. I see it now. So then I can tell Miss Mattie to pack extra food?"

"What are you talking about?"

"For our picnic tomorrow after church. If you put me and Mister Jethro first, ahead of your own self, then you'll go, 'cause we both want you to."

"Did he say that?"

"Maybe not exactly, but when I asked him, his eyes twinkled and he smiled bigger. I know he does want you to come. On account of how much he loves you."

Mary closed her eyes. Oh, Francy girl. "Driving two hours just to see the block of land Mister Jethro bought for the dairy does not sound like a reason to take off work."

The little shoulders sagged. Her lips turned down. "You promised."

"What did I promise?"

"To be nice to Mister Jethro. Remember when I sat all day in the corner? That's when you promised."

True, she had, though she'd forgotten. And it wouldn't hurt for her to see the place. After all, she was the business manager. "Fine, I'll go, but you must stop your matchmaking, little girl. I'm not going to marry Mister Risen."

She smiled as if she knew better then leaned in close. "Jethro. He doesn't know why you keep calling him Mister Risen. It is kind of mean. He'd really like you to call him Jethro instead; that's his name. And you promised."

Mary held her hands up. "Fine, I'll use his given name. Now skedaddle and see if Miss Lanelle needs any help with the babies."

"Sure! Thank you, ma'am." She turned and skipped around the counter singing a ditty about going on a picnic to the dairy, all the way to the front door then ran across the street.

The trip and picnic with Jethro and Francy surprised Mary, being such a pleasant afternoon. The valley he'd bought literally took her breath away. She gasped at first sight of it.

He went to explaining how he figured to lay everything out, and she couldn't fault him at all, not one idea seemed wrong. Smart man, not hard to look at either.

Shame he wasn't Edward Clinton.

Maybe she should take Sunday afternoons off like Francy had mentioned. Business always died down then anyway. But still, so many of the miners only came in once a month, usually on a Saturday. If she closed, then where would those men be?

Maybe if Edward would ever get back and finally stop running all

over the state buying up mines, she'd have a reason to stay closed on Sundays. But for right now, she'd keep things as they'd been.

She'd need to post the notice for at least two months ahead if she decided to change her schedule. Wouldn't want to disappoint any of her customers.

The next morning, she woke before the sun. She scooted away from the baby—such a bad bed partner—but then Rebecca said Mary had been bad herself. Oh, if only she could talk with her sister.

Lanelle had turned into a great cousin, but Rebecca remained the closest thing to a mother she had left.

What was that?

She rubbed her belly then scooted her hand out until she touched the baby. Another little kick. A kick? Blood drained from her face. How could it be?

Oh, Lord, please no. It can't be.

She jumped out of bed, threw on her housecoat, and tiptoed downstairs. She got a lucifer and hurried to her desk where she lit her oil lamp. Her fingers trembled as she flipped her ledger's pages.

Right there it was. The date she and Hank delivered Edward's fixtures. She counted on her fingers, but that only confirmed what she'd already figured out. Twenty weeks ago. More precisely, one hundred forty-two days.

Oh, Lord, no. How could You let... Father, please, bring him home to me now.



Jethro pounded in the last marker stake, stretched his back and shoulders, then drank in the valley's beauty. He loved it. Everything was all coming together. Well, most of it. Mary wasn't playing her part yet.

The picnic with her and Francy with the baby crawling all over the place... Almost like a real family. Then the very next day, something or somebody got her goat.

Her refusing an invitation to supper or anywhere else with him didn't only disappoint him, it flat hurt. Almost too much. Had he said something wrong? Had Francy?

Sure seemed to him he'd been on his best behavior. And his personal tell-all didn't have a clue to what was wrong either, but she'd noticed the change, too.

Once back in town, he stopped at the bank, then after arranging for the sawmill to draft on the orphanage's account, strolled toward the front door.

"Mister Risen."

He turned around. J. Pierce himself hurried toward him, holding a

small fat piece of cream paper. "A moment, my friend?"

Oh, how oily could one man be? "Of course."

The bank's big gun stopped short and extended an envelope. "I'm hosting a pounding for Mister and Mis'ess Clinton, to welcome her to our little town and their new home."

Jethro took it. "What do you get a man like Edward?"

The older man's lips turned up slightly. What could only be called a smile, except it wasn't, not really. "One of your kegs of nuggets would be nice."

Of course, the man had been lying awake at night lusting after his gold. Wasn't actually on deposit, so he couldn't loan it out but still couldn't bring himself to charge a storage fee. Just wait until he opened the Miners Bank.

J. Pierce would have himself a conniption fit.

"Black tie and evening gowns?"

The man nodded. "Extend the invitation to Mister Jones and his Mis'ess. And please, I'm trying to keep it a surprise as much as possible."

"I don't know about a keg, but we should think of something. When is it?"

"Saturday the fourteenth."

"I'll clear our calendar."

"Excellent. See you at seven sharp. The Clintons' address is on the invitation."

Once back in the buggy, he allowed himself a smile. So that was it. Mary must have heard Edward had found himself another lady, someone richer or better connected, and married her.

Bless God. Once she got over her disappointment, then maybe she'd see the error of her ways and realize she truly needed him.

Awesome news. Thank you, Father.

If only the mare could fly, but he got to the Mercantile plenty quick. He waited at the counter while she helped an older miner who couldn't make up his mind over exactly which shovel he needed, like it mattered. Finally, she weighed out his dust and sent him on his indecisive way.

She strolled over, but stayed back too far. "Mister... Excuse me, Jethro, how are you this evening?"

"Don't know, I seek a boon, but am concerned you won't be agreeable." He made his lips not smile. He hated that her heart hurt, but also loved the hope he now celebrated.



Unsure exactly what the man meant or how to take him, Mary

went to straightening the counter and shelves beside him. "Why are you talking in riddles? What's your favor?"

"I need a companion for a big shindig J. Pierce is hosting. Don't want to go by myself."

"When is it?"

"Saturday the fourteenth, seven sharp. That's plenty of time to have a gown made, isn't it? At my expense, of course."

"How do you always manage to be so irritating? Do you not think I have clothes or the money to buy a dress for myself?" Eight days. Yes, a formal gown could be easily sewn in half the time. "Just you and me, or did he invite Moses, too?"

"He did, and Lanelle."

"But he didn't ask me?" That's strange, her being a successful business owner and depositor at his bank. But she hadn't been in for a week or better. Jethro held a cream envelope.

Mister Prescott probably had an invitation for her. A formal party. She'd read about them. Sounded like fun. She'd always wanted to go to one. "And where is the party to be?"

He extended the envelope. "That might be my downfall."

She took the invitation, ripped it open, and folded out the piece of embossed heavy stock.

You are cordially invited to the home of

Mister and Mis'ess Edward D. Clinton

The paper slipped from her fingers. The words burned into her heart, branded her. Edward was married. Had that been the reason he went to New Orleans? His domineering father! He'd met him there and made him wed some socialite.

But... It couldn't be. Her hand went to her belly. Tears welled, but she blinked them away.

"Jethro..." She swallowed, had to get away. "Please lock..." The salty wetness overflowed. She glared through the tears. "How. Could. You?"

"Oh, Mary." He looked genuinely sorry and concerned. Did he know? How could he know? "I, of course, thought you knew. I never would have. Thought that was the reason you'd..."

"The keys... Desk drawer." She spun and ran upstairs, doing her best to hold back the sobs. Once to her room, she locked the door and flung herself across her bed, buried her face in her pillow, and wept. What was she going to do?

Oh, God, dear Father in Heaven, what in the world am I going to do?

Twice, Francy-sized knocks sounded on her door, then finally Susannah's cries pulled her back from the black pit her life had jumped into; yes jumped, she hadn't fallen. Oh, no. She'd chosen to do

what she did.

But her babies needed her. The situation, as bad as it seemed, wouldn't kill her, no matter how much she might wish....

But she couldn't die, wouldn't die; Susannah needed her.

She wiped her cheeks. Besides, once Edward found out she carried his child, he'd send his new wife home with a divorce and wed Mary.

After all, in California folks did all sorts of crazy things every day. Just look at Jethro... Oh, she'd made such a fool of herself. He couldn't have known....

Lord God in Heaven, help me, please.

Chapter Twenty-Four



From the oldbarbershop's front porch, Jethro watched the street come alive. Wagons, men on horseback, a few folks walked, and children darted here and there. Reminded him of ants scurrying about.

Right on time, Mary unlocked the Mercantile's front door, but she didn't come out and sweep her porch like so many mornings. Why had he thought she knew about Mis'ess Clinton?

But if she hadn't, then what else had changed to make her so cranky? She'd been so happy at the picnic, then boom, the next day so cold and unfriendly. Women, would he ever understand them?

Did he know so little about the opposite sex because of spending so much time away from his mother growing up?

One afternoon with her. Oh, how wonderful that would be.

He'd want a week to get his list of questions ready, and an extra day just to love on her, but.... Francy flew out of the Mercantile, paused long enough to look both ways—just like he'd drilled into her little thick skull—then raced right for him.

She sucked in one big breath. "Mister Jethro." She smiled and gulped another. "Miss Mary wants you."

He stood. "She mad?"

"Not really. Her eyes are red. What did you do?"

"Long story."

"Oh, don't say me that. I'm ten now remember? You were at my party."

"For this story, you've have to be at least sixteen."

She wrinkled up her nose then slipped her hand into his and pulled. "Come on."

He let his littlest love pull him to his true love. Hope floated on the morning breeze, but he wouldn't grab hold. Not yet. Not until he saw her face and heard her words.

Mary stood at the sales counter, not sitting on her throne hiding behind her desk. "Francy, go see if Miss Mattie needs help with the babies, please ma'am."

"Oh, they're fine."

"Mind Miss Mary."

She glared at him, puckered her lips and nose, then smiled real big.

“Yes, sir. I’ll leave you two alone if that’s what you both want.” She skipped toward the back.

He looked to the queen of the Mercantile. As though she’d been crying, her eyes seemed a bit swollen and red, but other than that, he couldn’t read her at all. Happy? Sad? Mad? Disappointed?

Another woman like all the rest, and he didn’t have a clue.

“Good morning.”

“Why did you think I knew Edward was married?”

“Sunday last, we had such a nice, happy picnic, then Monday you were so...uhmm...”

“What was I? Spit it out, Jethro.”

His given name, not Mister Risen, that was a good sign, right?

“Cool? Is that fair?”

“Just because I didn’t want to have supper with you? I was cool? And that led you to believe –”

“I’m sorry. When I heard about Clinton having a wife, I just –”

“You assumed that I had found out on Monday and that news had ruined my disposition?”

“Yes, ma’am. Figured it responsible for spoiling your usually good mood. I’d seen the two of you and knew about your supper date.” He shrugged and mouthed to Francie. “I’m so sorry, can you please forgive me?”

He resisted using his little boy grin, the one that always melted his mother’s heart.

He wanted her to wife not be his mother.



Could Mary believe this man?

She couldn’t abide being mean and hated it that anyone would think she acted that way. If he really thought that of her...and that she already knew about... But how could any of it matter now?

She had to see Edward, get a good look at the socialite for herself, and definitely did not want to go alone. Jethro offered that opportunity. Had Prescott not invited her on purpose? Did he know?

Had Edward said something to the banker?

Oh, dear God, surely not.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“What?”

“Uh, for your....” He stepped back and looked her over. “Green would be perfect, or a sky blue. Want me to have a seamstress bring some samples by? I mean if it wouldn’t offend you.”

There he went again. “No, sir, I do not. I’m perfectly capable.”

“Yes, ma’am, you are. I know that. You’re one of the most capable

ladies I've ever met. I only want to help, maybe lighten your load. So you will go with me?"

A chuckle came out as a little snort. In a different situation, she'd have herself a good laugh at the pathetic expression plastered across Risen's face. Oh, if only Edward loved her as much as it seemed poor Jethro did.

Would she always draw men's affections on looks alone? Though to be fair, he appreciated her head for business, even bragged on it.

So many suitors reminded her of the stories Rebecca told of all the men seeking the hand of the beautiful Widow Baylor before her father had won her heart. She pondered on her mother's vow, how it had kept her single all those years.

Maybe something similar might protect her from all the lonely men in San Francisco.

Oh, Mama, why did you have to die? I still missed you so much, even after eight years.

"Yes, I'll go with you, but don't read anything into it, please. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, and thank you, Mary. I'm thinking it's a thirty to forty minute buggy ride, so I'll call for you at six-twenty on Saturday."

"Six-thirty will be fine. We don't want to arrive early. Good then, now go away. I've got work to do, a dress to see to, and you have..." She finger-waved him away. "Whatever it is you do to get done."

He backed to the door, his grin about as big as Texas. "Yes, ma'am."

Texas. That's what she needed. Rebecca and her Wallace, her brother Levi and his Rose, and Mama May. Wouldn't that be fun to show up at this little shindig with the two of the most famed Texas Rangers ever?

One on each arm.

Like for you to meet my brother and brother-in-law, you chowderhead, low life, sorry excuse for a man.

Dare you. Look wrong at me, and they'll shoot you dead and feed you to the hogs. Her daddy had told Caleb that. And he'd been so right. Shut your pie hole, girl; that's what Laura would say.

Rangers didn't go around killing folks just because they broke your heart or got you pregnant.

Would Daddy ever forgive her for not listening to him?

Grandpa forgave her mother—but only after ten long years of separation. But the time span had been at least partly Mama's fault. She'd admitted it, and all because she thought the judge hated her for running off.

Could Mary's thinking be wrong like her mother's? Would Daddy welcome her back? Could she take that chance?

She needed to finish that letter and get it posted.

Why generations had to repeat the same mistakes remained a mystery.

But she'd topped her mother, gone and gotten herself pregnant before she remarried. What an embarrassing, degrading predicament. For too long, she wallowed in the pool of self-pity and loathing.

Oh well, Jethro Risen would have to do. She'd order the prettiest, most expensive gown ever. Her hair! How should she fix her locks? Have it coiffured?

"Francy."

Just as she figured, the girl showed her snoopy little face in no time. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Would you please see if Miss Lanelle is free for high tea."

"Can I come, too?"

"Yes, you may. I thought we could get together and talk about our dresses. Where's Hank and Amos?"

"Hank went with Mister Virgil to the docks to pick up our next shipment."

"Amos?"

"He's in the store room."

"Good, go on then, and watch crossing that street. It's busy this morning."

"Yes, ma'am." She smiled.

Her gown turned out exquisite, too expensive, but Lanelle had talked her into doubling the crystals on it. They'd all surely be dazzled. Mary deserved to have the most beautiful dress at the party, so her cousin claimed.

And cost didn't concern Francy one little bit as she insisted that Mary added yards of costly lace, and the little darling chose the biggest bustle to be had.

But as the big day neared, the nag lurking in the shadows of her soul grew to a stern whisper. He's married now. Forget him, the murmur beseeched, but her lovesick heart refused to listen. She'd seen him first.

Some spoiled rich girl that Mister Clinton arranged for his son to marry didn't count.

Her baby needed its daddy.

Saturday the fourteenth arrived. A horrible, wonderful day like she'd never known. From her window, she watched them load up. Jethro and Moses showed up handsome as she'd ever seen them in their black suits and top hats.

Lanelle, as beautiful as a bride in her soft yellow satin gown, and Jethro hired the perfect coach and driver. When he called for her, she wanted to run the other direction. What would Edward say to her?

Worse, her problem of how to get him alone to let him know about his baby? She decided on, then rejected the idea of a note, twice. She needed to see his face when she told him, work out the details.

He must free himself from the little gold digger.

Or was he the interloper? And the new bride the mother lode he'd been hunting so hard.

Francy pounded on the door announcing what she already knew. "He's here, come on, Miss Mary!" The minute she opened her door, the girl gasped. "You look like a beautiful princess."

Jethro stood at the bottom of the stairs with his mouth literally open. She slowly made her way down, enjoying his astonishment, sliding her gloved hand on the rail. At the bottom stair, he extended his hand and took hers.

"Heavens, Mary Wheeler, you look fabulous. Except... That's not a strong enough word."

"Why, thank you kindly, sir."

He raised her hand and examined the bracelet. "And this is remarkable, beautiful and unbelievably unique. Where'd you get it?"

Bowing her head slightly, she smiled at the infatuation in his eyes. She glanced past him toward the carriage and ignored his question. "Guess everyone's ready." She turned him toward the front door. "You clean up right nice yourself."

She'd never disclose that the trinket came from Edward as a gift, right before he tried to bed her for the second time.

Lanelle sat on the far side holding her skirts in. "Wow, cousin, you will definitely be the belle of the ball."

"I don't know about that, my love," Moses touched his wife's chin adoringly. "You're the only one I'll be staring at, because you're looking quite the beauty yourself."

Moses seemed crunched into the corner in the closer seat beside her. Lanelle showered him with near worship then looked back to her.

"We figured with all our petticoats and skirts, the ladies should sit across from the gents to have more room." She giggled. "I'm so excited."

Not Mary. Not at all. Nervous? Yes. Excited, no. Terrified might be a more accurate description of her condition. "You look wonderful in that dress, Lanelle. That shade of yellow's just perfect."

"Thank you. I'm proud you talked me into it."

The others took to chatting about the big shindig, but all Mary could think of, the closer the hired hack got to Nob Hill, was her upcoming confrontation.

Her head spun, then the coach stopped in front of the mansion—the home she'd thought would be hers. All the time she'd spent on it and errands for him—for another woman to enjoy!

The coachman opened the door. She let the man help her out then took Jethro's arm. A stream of folks dressed past the nines strolled up Edward's front walk. The grounds, all finished and so beautiful, were amazing.

Running water tinkled ever so slightly. A sweet, exotic scent hovered in the night breeze, inviting—even alluring—all the guests.

Beside Jethro, she joined the other lesser lights heading to the Clinton's grand mansion.

A butler or hired doorman ushered them into the grand hall. She knew the floor plan well, but followed without comment. There, just inside the entrance, Edward stood next to Prescott, engaged in conversation.

Next to him, a smaller version of himself stood beside a beautiful young lady who appeared to be younger than Francy, maybe seven. Beyond the little beauty, a mature version welcoming guests.

A wife indeed! What a fool she'd been. These were his children! He'd been married all along!

Dear God, what an evil leech!

She held her chin up, snuggled in tight to Risen, and plastered a pleasant expression on her face. A Buckmeyer could stand anything, endure any hardship, pay any price. How many times had her father lived those exact words?

Her turn swiftly approached. Rose lived five years with the Comanche. They couldn't break her, and Mary was just as strong as her sister-in-love.

Prescott said something.

She nodded, staring at Edward, noting every crinkle around his eyes. How could he?

He shook Jethro's hand. She burrowed in even tighter to her partner, trying to draw from his strength.

Then Edward spoke. "Mary, so good of you to come. This is my son Eddy. Say hi to my friend, Son."

The little chip off the old block grinned. "Hello, ma'am, good to meet you."

"And this is Alice."

Mary smiled.

Such a nice-looking young lady, shame she had such a rotten egg for a father. Poor little girl.

"And I'd like you to meet my wife Shellie."

Mary held out her hand, her bracelet jingled. The woman slipped her fingers into Mary's. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Mary owns the Lone Star Mercantile in town, dear."

"How nice, are you from Texas then?" She twirled the gold nuggets on Mary's wrist. "What an unusual bracelet, it's so lovely."

“Why thank you. Here.” She untangled her other arm from Risen and undid the clasp. For you, Mis’ess Clinton.” She put the bracelet in Shellie’s palm, noticing the horror in her husband’s eyes.

“Oh no, my dear. You shouldn’t. I didn’t mean...”

“Please, take it. I’m tired of it, and if you like it, you should have it. Think of me whenever you wear it.”

“Really? That’s so generous of you, and kind. It’s so lovely.” She draped it over her wrist and showed it to Edward, whose fear had somewhat abated. “Help me, darling.”

J. Pierce leaned across and eyed the bracelet then gawked at her. “Quite the welcoming gift, I’d say.”

While the man whose baby she carried fastened the bracelet on his wife’s arm, the woman turned back.

“Thank you, Mary. I will remember this night and your lovely gift. I’ve never been more welcomed, and I will surely think of you, sweet lady, each and every time I wear it.”

Giving Shellie the letch’s bribe—or did he consider it payment for services rendered?—helped some, but then what? Seeing his wife and children quenched any ridiculous ideas of a life with Clinton.

Her heart betrayed her, still wanted the man. Stupid organ, it should listen to her brain. Her head knew way better.

But she’d be showing before long. What would she do? Sell the Mercantile? She could offer it to Jethro and Moses. Go somewhere new and start over? A pregnant widow. No one in Sacramento knew her.

No, that’d be too close. Texas was out. South America? No one there would know her.

She tried a few bites of the foods she recognized. No more squid or any other strange dish, but her stomach couldn’t take even the familiar from Edward’s table. The baby claimed his due. His. Had she called it a him? No, she wanted another girl, a baby sister for Susannah. Yes, a girl.

Working on one goblet the whole evening, she only took a few sips of wine. The last thing she needed was for her tongue to get the better of her.

“Care to dance?”

She set her glass down. Jethro held his hand out. Why not? “I’d love to, thank you, kind sir.”

He kept her hand and led her to the dance floor. The band leader tapped his wand twice. The strings came in first, followed by the brass. Jethro shepherded her around the floor, surprisingly light on his feet, graceful, handsome.

Then the other side of herself spoke up. Also so pig-headed and domineering.

She needed to forget men, all men. She'd given love a chance. Twice surrendered her heart to bad men. She had her babies and Francy. Would the little girl go with her? More than likely not, she'd insist on staying with Jethro.

The man shifted his hand on her back, barely touching her, yet leading her. She looked up into his eyes.

Loving her?

Not once did he discover the truth.

Maybe she should take a job at the Golden Dragon. Meiko could show her the ropes.

That was just ludicrous. She could never do such a thing!

The song ended before any plausible solution presented itself. She danced two more with him then begged off. The shoes she'd bought to match the dress didn't wear nearly as good as they looked.

On the way back to the table, still holding her hand, he leaned in and whispered. "Clinton give you that bracelet?"

She nodded, blinking tears back.

"You see his face when you took it off?"

She nodded again.

"I love how you handled him."

"Thank you." If only he knew....

Way past her being ready, Moses suggested they call it a night. Mary held her peace, determined to stay until the finale, before ruining anyone's fun.

Even though Lanelle seemed reluctant, she agreed, and the most horrible night of her life ended. The ride home took too long, as did getting the dress off, feeding both babies, and getting her weary self in bed.

If only she could sleep a year or two and wake up with all this behind her.

For a while, she allowed the tears to flow then willed them to be finished. The man definitely proved himself unworthy, certainly not worth crying over, and though unsure of an exact destination, she had to get away from San Francisco.

Edward could never know about the baby.



Two days and over thirteen hundred miles east by southeast, Mary's brother-in-law, Texas Ranger Captain Wallace Rusk, trotted his gelding toward home.

He wanted to run him and would once he reached the halfway mark, but he'd never rode a horse to ground, and wasn't about to abuse this one. No doubt the animal would gallop to his death if

Wallace asked it of him.

Considering the flyer tucked into his inside breast pocket, he played out several scenarios and came to only one true conclusion.

Later that night, after dinner, once he and Rebecca settled into his and her private room—finding alone time had to be on purpose living in a home with seventeen souls under roof. He'd be glad when the new house on the creek could finally be completed.

"Fancy a trip?"

Rebecca put her finger in the novel, one of Mama May's earlier ones, and shrugged. "Where's better than right here?"

Who could argue with such logic? He had to agree, but he also had a plan. "This caught my eye today." He handed over the Pinkerton's wanted flyer.

She held the paper out. "You know this Gunther Swartz?"

"No, but read on. Check the small print. See why he's wanted, who he killed."

Realization widened her eyes. "No, Wallace! This has to be another Caleb Wheeler! Mary Rachel would have written or come home. No... It can't be. Do you suppose something's happened...?"

She put the flyer aside, as though she couldn't stand to see it a moment longer. "Does daddy know about this?"

"I didn't tell him. Started to twice during supper, but I'm thinking we need to go. You and I. See for ourselves without telling the why. Takes less than a month to get there if what I heard is true."

"Poor Mary Rachel. It can't be her Caleb."

Not so sure as his wife, but either way, he didn't need her daddy going to California and killing the boy if he wasn't already dead. Wallace and at least half the state wanted Henry to stand for governor next term.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Jethro had to go, even with Mary acting so weird. The gang of carpenters scheduled to arrive tomorrow needed him.

Moses, while great at many things, couldn't line out master craftsmen with any success if his life depended on it, just not on his list. His friend and simple drawings remained total strangers.

The more complex ones he'd drawn up were beyond most folks. Elijah could have gone, but he worked at the mine blasting for much needed funds.

Taking the time to tell his loves he was heading out, only got his heart broken. Francy begging him not to go, crying buckets of tears. Mary's indifference hurt more, but as he cleared town, he rehearsed again exactly what she'd said.

It wasn't the goodbye, but how she said it that troubled him, as though she planned on leaving. Had Clinton hurt her so bad she couldn't stand being in the same town?

The night's symphony offered no solace. The crickets and frogs and nightingales sang, worshipped the Creator, but failed to soothe his troubled heart. He prayed deep into the night then slept until the wagonload of men arrived. Ex-miners all, but who wasn't these days?

The best in the bunch, a real to goodness carpenter name of Lee Baker, took one long look at his plans, checked the stakes for true—pleased Jethro he'd gotten it within an eighth of an inch—then started barking orders.

If things were different, he'd have stayed and watched Baker and his boys throw up the main building.

But he needed to get back, sensed an urgency for it. He had to try his best to talk Mary out of leaving town. If indeed, that was what she had on her mind.

At the head of his valley, he stood in the buggy and took a last look. They'd already raised and braced one wall. Wonderful. If Mary just had to get away, maybe he could convince her to come to the valley tomorrow or the next day.

He sat down, and for some strange reason, instead of moving on, he turned around and pulled out his Bible. Setting it into his lap, he opened it to the Gospels. A breeze picked up and stirred the pages,

blowing through them, turning them.

The wind settled as suddenly as it had blown up, and the gust left the Good Book opened to the third chapter of Hosea.

Then said the Lord unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the Lord toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods, and love flagons of wine.

Oh, Lord, You want me to be like Hosea?

YES REUEL TAKE AN ADULTERESS TO WIFE LOVE HER AS I LOVE YOU

Tears streamed down his cheeks. He closed the Bible and returned it to its place.

“Yes, Lord. How can I not do as you ask, Father? You are my Redeemer, my life. I will go anywhere and do anything You ask.”

He tapped the reins over the mare’s back. He loved Mary, not Meiko, but God knew that. Would the China Doll even want anything to do with him? The harlot had sent word for him to come, but that had been months ago.

He didn’t trust himself then, but now...

“Oh, Father, is this how Jesus felt in the garden when he begged for You to take this cup from Him? God in Heaven, seated on the throne, take this from me! Yet, not my will, but Yours be done. My Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy...” He closed his eyes and prayed like he never had before.

When he opened them again, the mare had stopped in front of the Mercantile. How had he got here? He needed to go to the Dragon, but first, he’d say goodbye. His heart ached, such pain. How could he?

And his little Francy. She couldn’t be anywhere near Meiko, not for a while anyway.

He extracted himself from the buggy and made his feet carry him up the front stairs, forced them to take him inside. Every step so hard, his legs so heavy. The warring going on around him, in him, fought against his determination to please God, to say his forever goodbye to his love.

Would she know how hard it was? Or even care?

“Jethro, what are you doing here? I thought you were staying at the mine.” She stepped around the counter. For too many breaths, he drank in her beauty, burning her image into his soul.

Then the small, still voice spoke again to his heart, and he knew.

Oh, Lord, no. Mary... and Clinton? Dear God...

“Jethro, why are you staring at me like that?”

He stepped closer, lifted her hand, and dropped to one knee.

“Marry me, please. Be my wife.”

“What? No, Jethro. I cannot. Get off your knee this minute.”

“No, I won’t. Not until you say yes.”

“But you don’t know... I can’t. Jethro, trust me. I’m leaving. In the morning.”

He changed knees moving closer. “I’ll take you home to Texas, meet your father and get his blessing. Then we’ll go to New York and you can meet mine. We need to be reconciled to our fathers.”

She pulled her hand out of his and held them up, palms out. “No. I’m never going back to Texas. My father hates me. He didn’t want me to be with Caleb, warned me. But I snuck off while he was gone, and got married against his wishes. He would –”

“No. He doesn’t hate you.” Tears blurred his vision. “He loves you. Mary, your father is sick over losing his baby girl.”

Her own tears overflowed and wet her cheeks. “No.” She backed away a step. “He can never forgive me or love me again.”

Wiping his face, he laughed. “No, think about it. He’ll be like the prodigal son’s father. He’ll run to meet you, kill the fatted calf, and call his neighbors to come and celebrate. Does he even know you’re alive?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know.” She ducked her head. Tears flowed freely. “But you don’t want me. You don’t know me.” She looked into his eyes. “I don’t love you, Jethro.”

He changed knees again and now touched her skirt, stood, then lifted her chin with one finger. “Look at me.”

“No.”

“I love you, Mary Wheeler. Two hours ago, the Lord spoke to my heart, told me to do what Hosea had to do. I thought He was talking about Meiko, and that broke my heart because I love you. But it was you. He told me to come and to marry you. Do you understand?”

She looked up again and met his gaze. “You know? He told you? If you know, then how can you say you love me?”

“I don’t know how it works, but God inspired Paul to tell men to love their wives. He commanded us to, with no conditions, and I do love you. Have since I first saw you.” He smiled. “Though maybe I wouldn’t admit to it at first.”

“Why would you, the way I acted.”

“But I promise you, I will always love you, no matter what. Will you be mine? Say you’ll be mine.” He grinned. “Or do you want me to get back on my knee?”



Mary’s heart hurt. Her whole chest ached, it hurt so bad. How could she do this to Jethro? She carried another man’s child. He was saying all the right things now, but he couldn’t know. Hosea, what was his story? She only remembered he wrote a short book. Couldn’t

be very important.

But if Jethro thought God meant Meiko, he must have to do with prostitutes. Didn't God tell someone to marry a harlot? Probably smart enough not to get pregnant. "Jethro, I... I'm..." She put both hands on her stomach and wept.

He wrapped his arms around her. Why wasn't he running away? "Sweet Mary, I love children. I'll be the baby's father. I'll make you a good husband, be faithful, and love all our babies."

"If..." She closed her eyes. Could she really go back? Face her father? In a month's time, there'd be no hiding her condition. Lying to Patrick Henry Buckmeyer just wasn't an option. He could smell a falsehood two counties over.

He leaned back a little. "If what?"

Where were the customers? A few minutes ago, the store was packed, and now totally empty. "If my father..." Where was Francy? Or Hank or anyone?

"Go on, finish your thought."

"If Daddy gives his blessing, then... Yes. I'll marry you."

"Excellent." He held her away and looked her in the eyes. "You will not regret this. Not ever. I promise you."

Actually, she already was, but perhaps...it could be for the best. She'd loved two men, both rotten scoundrels. Maybe Jethro knew best, and him loving her would be enough. Lanelle claimed she loved Moses now, and they seemed so happy.

"When can we leave? How soon? I want to get gone."

"Have you made any arrangements?"

"No. I was going to talk with Moses tonight and tell Francy in the morning."

"She'll want to go."

"She is so good with Susannah."

"Amos, if he wants." He grinned. "Tomorrow if we can get everything ready? Can Mattie and Virgil run the store?"

"Yes."

"Then day after, if we can't get it done tomorrow? What about Joshua?"

She hated leaving him, but Lanelle wouldn't part with him. "He's eating some foods now. Moses can get a goat if he needs to. What about the orphanage? Aren't the carpenters there now?"

"It's in good hands. They've got my plans. Moses can keep an eye on it and the mine. Elijah will help wherever he's needed. Has anyone told you about the fuse he invented?"

"No, but tell me later. Francy, of course, but why Amos?"

"Why not? We'll be back in -"

"Do you really want to come back?"

He nodded. "No one has to know anything. We can stay gone a year if you want. More reason to take Amos. He is Francy's brother."

"Six months will do."

"Your folks keep cows?"

"Of course."

"Milk or meat?"

"Both, why?"

"We need both, and someone who knows something about the little darlings, and a trip to New York is a must."

The man's words washed over her, soothed her soul, just like that horrible night at Edward's. She could never have made it through that evening without Jethro. A peace swept through her.

Then little footfalls turned her around. Her baby girl rode on her big girl's hip. Both grinned; Susannah at her, and Francy at the man.

"Hey, Mister Jethro, when did you get back?"

"Just now. You interested in making a trip?"

"Yes, sir. Where are we going?"

Mary smiled. How could she not be excited? Jethro was saving her from shame and from having to leave San Francisco forever. No matter what her daddy did, she'd still get to see her family, and they'd get to see her babies.

"Texas! You, me, and my soon-to-be husband are leaving tomorrow if we can get everything ready. Amos, too, if he wants to go."

The girl's mouth gaped open. "To Texas?" She looked from Mary to Jethro then back. "You two—us three—we're getting married?"

Jethro stepped forward. "Maybe."

"Why maybe? You asked. She said yes, right?"

"That's correct. But we've got to get her father's blessing, and he's in Texas."

"Oh." The girl nodded with much exaggeration. "I see. So how far is that?"

"It will take us about a month."

"Will I still be ten?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Despite all the happy intentions, it took four days to make arrangements. It surprised Mary, but not Francy, that Amos didn't want to go. Goodbye tears flowed with many last minute instructions, then the little skiff carried them to the Antelope.

Fitting to leave on the same steamship that brought her to California two years ago.

So much had changed.

Once she figured she'd never leave her new adopted hometown; now she had to, for her sake and her baby's.

Texas. Confrontation with Henry Buckmeyer waited in the Lone Star State. An image of her father brought tears. She remembered something he often said.

She had sown to the wind. A tear trickled down her cheek. She had certainly reaped the whirlwind.

Lord, let the storm die now and blow it all away. Let what Jethro said be true. Move on Daddy's heart to forgive me.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Jethro saw the tear. She'd said she had to get away. Was she now crying over leaving that no-good adulterer?

LOVE HER REUEL

Yes, Lord. As you love me, I will love her.

Once on board and settled in, his ladies right across the hall from him, he tapped on their door.

Francy's little pumpkin head appeared, but not much else. "Yes? Did you need something, Daddy?" She tried not to—he could tell—but couldn't hide the grin.

"Oh, is that my new name?"

"Figured it's plenty right since you and Miss Mary are going to be my parents now. Do you like it?"

"I love it, makes perfect sense to me."

"Yes, sir, plus Amos isn't here to stop me!" She giggled.

"Anyone in there hungry?"

"We're busy right this minute, Miss Mary is..." The grin vanished. "Well she's uh... tending to Susie."

"I see. Well, when she finishes her tending, you ladies come to the dining room. I'll go get us a table."

"Yes, sir, Daddy."

He strolled down the stairs, smiling. His little girl was so, working so hard on being grown up. He fished out the two little boxes from his coat pocket. Hopefully, she'd prove mature enough for her present. No doubts she'd love it, not a one. Would Mary love hers, too? On that he wasn't as sure, but hoped.

The cook put out a more than decent meal. It surprised him Mary finished her plate then Francy's. But she was...pregnant. He might as well get used to it. He'd promised to love her unconditionally. Francy's wasn't his blood either, but he loved her beyond measure. He'd love the new baby, too.

"Lovely dinner." She placed her napkin wadded beside her plate. "Thank you, kind sir."

"My pleasure." He put their presents in front of each lady then leaned back. Francy giggled. Mary only smiled, and a weak one at that. "Go ahead, look inside."

The girl tore the paper off hers, while Mary unwrapped hers more slowly.

Francy held up her necklace. "Wow, can I wear it? It's beautiful." She popped out of her chair and handed it to him. "Will you put it on for me?"

"Happy to." He looked to Mary, who obviously enjoyed the girl's joy. Smiling, she nodded her approval. Why hadn't she opened hers yet?

"Now you're big enough for this present, aren't you?" Mary faced Francy. "You'll take good care of it?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am." She patted the dangling bauble, then hugged him hard. "Is it real gold, Daddy?"

Checking Mary's reaction pleased him. She seemed fine with the little girl calling him that. He spun his new unofficial daughter around. "Sure is. Came straight out of our mine. It looks beautiful on you. I'm proud you like it."

"Oh no, sir, I love it. Thank you so much." She bent over and kissed his cheek then put her hand over the little nugget hanging on the gold chain. "It's wonderful, I really do love it."

"It's a special nugget, the very first one I ever found at the mine. Been saving it."

"Oh, wow, the first one?"

"Yes, ma'am."

He looked to his love. She stared at her unwrapped jewelry box.



The last time she'd done this, it hadn't worked out like Mary hoped. Boarding the steamer had been the first step, but if what she thought lay in here, then it would be the last. If she put his ring on her finger, was her life over?

The Bible did say for husbands to love their wives, but it also said for wives to submit to their husbands. As unto the Lord. Knowing how bossy he was, could she do her part?

As unto the Lord.

That meant immediate submission with no questions.

She studied Jethro. He was a good man, wise, kind. She lifted the little box and turned it one way then another. Generous, patient, and saved. He'd definitely gotten his soul right with God, the difference obvious from that day.

But could she stand him bossing her around the rest of her days? And at that point, did it make any difference?

"Miss Mary, open it! What'd he get you?"

She removed the lid Two fat gold bands with crystals encased in the little crevices of the precious metal. A single diamond sat atop the

smaller one, each ring almost identical except for the diamond. One her size, the other his.

“Oh, Jethro, they’re gorgeous; I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“They’re both made from a single nugget, the biggest one I’ve ever found.”

She handed his to him. “Thank you.”

She slipped hers on and held it up. It fit perfectly. How did he know? But...it wasn’t perfect. Could she spend the rest of her life with a man she didn’t love?

Maybe her father would forbid her to marry again. He might try and make her stay there. With him. Except she wouldn’t. Once the baby was born... What? Go back to California? Oh, she chased rainbows.

Soon as Daddy found out she was in the family way, he’d be all for her marrying Jethro. He’d like Jethro. He was ten times the man Caleb had ever been. Why couldn’t she see?

“Want me to go put Susie down for the night?”

Mary glanced at the baby then Francy. “That would be great. Your daddy and I need a few minutes alone.”

The girl grinned. “Yes, Mama. Anything else, Mother?”

Laughing, Mary arched a brow. “Yes, ma’am, now that you ask. I could sure use a good hug.”

At first it hurt her a little that the girl called him Daddy but kept calling her Miss Mary. Francy obviously wasn’t sure her new mother would like the idea, at least not as confident as she was of her new daddy.

But she’d wormed her way deep into Mary’s heart, and she couldn’t love the ten-year-old any more if she’d given birth to her. She remembered being introduced that first time to Shorty and how the girl wanted no part of being female.

That hadn’t lasted long. Francy won the hearts of everyone she came across. A precious little doll. She came and hugged Mary long and tight, then turned and hugged Jethro before getting the baby.

Mary would almost swear she saw tears in his eyes; the big ol’ softie. She sighed. Her half-grown unofficial daughter would be so heartbroken if everything didn’t work out. She lifted the baby, and Francy took her.

“Go on now, before my milk comes down again.”

She shifted the baby, kissed Mary’s cheek, then strolled off with Susannah on her hip.

Mary faced Jethro. “I love my ring.”

“They did a wonderful job. I’m thrilled, too.”

She gripped the table in front of her and studied her fingers. What should she say? Was the die cast? If anyone asked, no way could she

come up with a reason she agreed to the trip. Oh, wait. She remembered.

Edward's baby, except she wasn't his. Would never be. Mister Clinton would never know about her.

"Please forgive me."

She looked up. "What for?"

"Being pigheaded. I should have sold you our interest in the Mercantile that first time you asked."

Would he ever cease to amaze her? Or could the whole thing be his plot? Kill her with kindness? "Apology accepted. Why, pray tell, didn't you sell? I would have paid a premium."

He pulled his lips into a weird sort of smile, except not actually a smile at all. "It's what you said. You hurt my heart, and well...it's what I told my father the last time I saw him."

"Is this a long story? Am I old enough to hear?"

He grinned, obviously genuinely tickled. "No, ma'am. You need to know it all."



Jethro started at the beginning, hitting the highlights; his father's wealth, the boarding schools, him wanting to please his mother above all. All his life he'd desperately wanted her to love him enough to stop sending him away.

The begging slowed down when he reached his sixteenth year. His last full, happy year.

"I was home for the summer, except she'd planned a hunting trip for me the three weeks before the fall semester. Anyway, this day she'd been in a tizzy. Father had some bigwigs coming for dinner, and everything had to be perfect. Her regular dinner parties wouldn't compare to that one."

"I guess all ladies are a little that way."

He drained his water glass. "I tried to keep a low profile. When she got like that, no one was safe. Well, except Father. She never crossed him. Anyway, this young lady strolls into the library where I'm camped out, minding my own business.

She glides right up to me and sits on my lap."

"No! Without a word? How young was she?"

He shrugged. "Maybe twenty. Could have been younger, but I didn't know. I was sixteen and couldn't believe it."

"What'd she do?"

"Asked which room was mine."

"She didn't. Is this broad daylight?"

"Yes, ma'am. About three o'clock, but before I could find my voice and tell her second room from the main stairs, my mother stood in the

doorway. In the nicest, sweetest-toned, lilting soprano, she says, ‘Jethro, could you help me in the kitchen?’ ”

“Could she see what was going on?”

“Oh, yes. Well, I excused myself and followed Mother out, except she doesn’t go to the kitchen. She led me straight to her sunroom and sat me down.”

“Good for her. What’d she say?”

“Told me the young lady was one of Father’s courtesans, and she didn’t want me to have a thing to do with her.”

“He was that brazen? Bringing harlots into your home?”

“Afraid so.”

“I didn’t know it until that day, why mother kept me away from the house so much. He asked me the next day if I had enjoyed his present.”

“He told that woman to come to your room?”

Jethro nodded. “After he lost all his money, and mother killed herself—the day before Moses and I left to work on the canal—I hunted him up and told him I hated him. That I hated what he’d done to my mother, and how I never wanted anything to do with a whoremonger like him.”

“Oh, Jethro, I’m so sorry I called you that. I didn’t know, but didn’t you and Meiko –?”

“No, never.”

“Anyone else?”

“No, ma’am. Mother sent me to boys schools, and father drilled it into me that a certain type of female used sex to entrap you and get your money; so with my serious aversion to soiled doves....” He chuckled. “I partnered up with Moses Jones the day I met him, and he always set the bar so high. Here’s this big burly guy who’s like a saint. Had no vices except me. How could I not walk the straight and narrow?”

“That’s good to know. If Daddy gives his blessing, you’ll be my third and last.”



Henry Buckmeyer loved sitting the head of his supper table. If his family got much bigger, he’d have to add onto the room and build a bigger table. Black walnut maybe. He studied on that notion for a while between bites, then Rebecca placed her napkin next to her plate.

“Daddy, Wallace and I have been talking about a trip to California.”

His wife spoke up before he could. “Oh, that’s lovely. I’ve always wanted to go there myself, but then I met your father.” He loved the way she looked at him.

Henry put his fork down. "California, huh?" He turned his gaze on his son-in-law. "The easy gold's about played out if what I hear is true."

Wallace nodded. "Yes, sir, but we don't have the fever."

"Exactly where in California?"

"San Francisco, maybe Sacramento." His oldest smiled at him, but he could see it in her eyes. Rebecca had never been good at keeping secrets, leastwise not from him.

"This trip have anything to do with your sister?"

She pursed her lips, glanced at Wallace, then back at him. "Yes, sir. I miss Mary Rachel and want to go see how she's doing. She's still my sister."

Her husband pulled a flyer out of his pocket and handed it over. The same Pinkerton poster he'd seen.

"Got this in Clarksville last week. Rebecca and I have been kicking around going ever since. Decided we would last night."

"No need, I saw the flyer, too. I've sent letters of inquiry and figure we'll be hearing soon enough if it was Mary Rachel's Caleb."

"I hope it isn't, but even if it is, shouldn't we be about finding her? Bringing her home? What if she's broke, living in some hovel? I can't stand not knowing. I still want to go."

He shook away that image, the same one he'd rejected numerous times in the last week.

"No, not Mary Rachel. She's fine, and yes, I understand. I want to see your little sister so bad I can hardly stand it sometimes, but it's her choice. If she doesn't want to be here, I'm not going to hogtie her and drag her back."

The two years she'd been gone hadn't been easy on his heart, but she'd come home when she was ready. His beautiful wife sat scooted back in her chair. "I think you ought to bless their trip west—not that they need your blessing, I mean they are adults and can go when and where they want."

She stood and moved behind him, wrapping his head in an embrace with her arms folded across his chest. "It'll be fun for them, and maybe we can find out about our precious girl. I hate not knowing as much as you do."

"Can I go, Rebecca? I want to see Mary Rachel, too, and I was really good on the trip to Europe, wasn't I, Mama?"

He smiled at his youngest daughter, the only girl who'd never added the May to Mama. "Very good, excellent I say."

"You were wonderful, Bonnie, just perfect." May squeezed him a bit tighter.

Of course, the begging was on then. Cecelia stood up and glared at her little sister. "I want to go, too, I'm older. Can I, Rebecca? Take

me.”

“If any sister goes, it should be me, CeCe. I’m the oldest.”

Gwendolyn put her bid in. “Can I, Daddy?”

Rebecca cleared her throat. “Actually, girls, as much as I hate to disappoint you all, Wallace and I were thinking of making it a honeymoon trip since we never really had one. So no, not this trip. If we find Mary Rachel, maybe we can talk her into coming home for a visit.”

How he would love laying eyes on his prodigal daughter again, but she had to be the one to decide. After all, she was the one who left.

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Mary watched until Francy and Susannah disappeared through the dining room door. She set her coffee cup on the table then smiled at Jethro. “Have you been putting her up to all this alone time she’s giving us?”

He grinned. “I’ve mentioned it a time or two.” The look on his face exuded pure joy.

What a little kid. Guess she might just be his new toy. But maybe not.

He didn’t seem to be tiring of her at all, and the past ten days had been wonderful; no responsibility to speak of, coupled with spending time with the man that would soon be her husband. That prospect became less distasteful by the day.

One thing that nagged at her though, actually two, on reflection. “Hey, I’ve been wondering about a couple of things.”

“Ask what you will.”

“You said that day when you proposed, that God told you to do it.” She leaned in and bore into his eyes. “Was it like God talking from the burning bush or...what exactly?”

She would love for the Almighty to tell her what to do. As long as she could be certain it was Him.

He looked out the ship’s window then back. She admired the way he always thought about what he wanted to say, find the exact words.

“The voice comes from inside, I guess my heart. I can’t tell you how, but I know it’s Him; same voice that helped me get saved and has talked to me at other times. Like when Amos and Francy came to the mine. Her brother introduced her as his brother. God told me to take her to Mary, said, ‘She needs her.’ That’s how I knew Shorty was a girl.”

“God called me by name?”

“Yes, ma’am, He did.” He chuckled. “Do you know the story of Reuel?”

“Who?”

“Moses’ father-in-law.”

She searched her memory. “That’s not right; it was Jethro who gave his oldest daughter to Moses, not Reuel.”

He nodded. "The one and only time he's called Reuel, is when Moses first comes to Median..." He closed his eyes, moved, then opened one. "Maybe the eighteenth chapter of Exodus? Anyway, the next time you hear about him, he's called Jethro, which means large. Reuel means friend of God."

"Wow, I never knew that. Why the name change?"

"Doesn't say, but I figure he went from having a few sheep that his daughters were tending, to having so many Moses had to take them to the back side of God's mountain to find good pasture. The Lord had blessed him so much he became Jethro." He smiled. "God's been calling me Reuel of late."

"Really?"

"That's right. Was a time, all I wanted was to be rich again, go back, and rub my old man's nose in it. Maybe even buy the house he lost." He shrugged. "All I want now is to be God's friend. The gold doesn't mean a thing anymore, except as a means to be obedient to Him."

"Like the orphanage?"

"Exactly. It's you my love, and Francy, and our babies that's important."

His words warmed her heart. He wasn't just saying the right things, he was living them. The orphanage, the miner's bank, Francy, Amos, and now her unborn baby.

"When Miss Ling's daughter burst in that day?"

His lips drew tight, but no pain dulled his eyes. A good sign. "What of it?"

"She called you Jet."

"It's what Moses used to call me, but I made him stop. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I've been thinking on a pet name for you. Any suggestions?"

He grinned. "Husband."

She returned his mirth then turned serious. "What if..." The words wouldn't come.

"He'll say yes. Don't you fret one bit."

"No, that isn't it. Daddy's going to say yes, if he talks to me at all."

"Then what's the if?"

"What if I never love you?"

"Doesn't matter, the onus is on me to love you. I haven't found one place scripture tells the wife to love her husband. And I do love you, Mary Rachel, with my whole being. Father God will take care of the rest."

Saying all the right things, and so good looking...

Why was she still guarding her heart?



Movement caught Jethro's eye. Francy with her little sis on her hip hurried toward her new mother. With her free hand, she held her nose. He smiled and nodded toward the approaching duo.

"Looks like someone needs changing, and you're the changer of choice. Sometimes I feel so sorry for mothers. Like now."

She jumped up and met the little ones halfway, took the baby and disappeared without a look back.

He understood about mothers and their babies, but an I'll-be-back glance would have been nice. What if she never did love him? He stared into the coffee dregs. The black liquid held no answers.

His parents hadn't loved each other, only their wealth. That had been evident. Mother had tolerated his infidelity, and he never shed a tear at her funeral.

Before he found out what Meiko's profession was, his love for her was sure. He smiled, 'for sure and for certain,' as Mary would say. Then once he desired to purchase the wares she sold, his longing grew almost worse.

So had it only been lust all along? He told Mary the truth. He definitely loved her.

If only he knew exactly what that meant.

He loved Moses Jones without a doubt, the brother he never had. Maybe even a surrogate father in an odd way. Lord knew his own was no prize.

As much as he wanted, he'd resisted asking Mary about Caleb or Clinton. The first he'd affirm a scoundrel without one reservation, but he'd declare the second evil, taking advantage of the poor girl, trying to buy her off with that bracelet.

His lips spread into a big grin. Never would he forget the look on the man's face when Mary took his trinket off and gave it his wife.

Poor woman. Someday—if she hadn't already—she'd discover the truth about her adulterous husband. Would she choose his wealth, too? Stay for the sake of the money? Or at least partly maybe, her children.

His mother's words still hurt his heart. "I've nowhere to go, Jethro. All the money is his."

Each turn of the steamer's paddle wheel drew him closer to Henry Buckmeyer. Mary claimed he would give his blessing, but Jethro wasn't so sure, especially if the man thought he'd fathered the baby.

Would she marry him anyway?

Would he want her to?

These past days, the idea of spending the rest of his days with her—Mary being his wife—had so ingrained itself in his soul. Could he

deny her whatever she wanted?

“More coffee, sir?”

The waiter stood next to him holding a carafe. “Please, and...” Mary glided through the door. “A fresh cup for the lady.”

“Yes, sir.” The man poured his, reached over to the next table, grabbed another cup then filled it and vanished. Who wouldn’t love the trappings of money? First class had its advantages.

Mary slipped into her seat. “I promised Francy we’d both read to her later.”

“Not that same book.”

The aroma of the hot brew wafted, and he loved it. “No.” She smiled. “Wants you to read from the Bible, and me from a novel I brought along.”

“One of your step-mother’s?”

“An old one.” She nodded, scanning the room. “I’ve read it at least twice.” Her gaze returned to him. “But it will be fun to introduce Mama May to our little girl.”

He liked that, Mary Rachael calling Francy our girl, letting him share ownership, though in truth, he counted the ten-year-old more his. “Tell me about your family, especially your father.”

She took a sip of coffee then shrugged. “Mama’s first husband Andrew Baylor and his brother Jacob, Levi’s dad, died in the same logging accident, leaving her a widow, pregnant, with a five-year-old nephew to raise.”

“Levi is the Texas Ranger everyone knows about, right?”

“Yes, sir. He’s made quite a reputation for himself. You’ll love him, everyone does. My older sister Rebecca came, like six months later. That was in 1823. She’s married to his sidekick, Wallace Rusk now. The two of them are real close like you and Moses. So, Levi’s really a cousin, but we all count him a brother. His mother had died at birth.”

Though he should maybe take notes, he nodded.

“In ’32, Mama and Levi, who was fourteen then—Rebecca was nine, made their best cotton crop ever. It’s a long story.”

He laughed. “Am I not old enough to hear it?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Yes, if you really want to. I just didn’t want to bore you. I have a huge, wonderful family. Wait until I get to all the children.” She laughed.

The sound of her light-hearted mirth caressed his ears and reassured him everything would work out. It had to. “Yes, I do want to hear it all.”

Her head swayed back and forth as she boiled it all down. “To say Mama was headstrong...” She grinned. “Safe to call that an understatement.”

“Hold it, why’d she miss the neighbors’ wagon train?”

“There was this man, I forget his name, who’d agreed to buy her cotton, but on the morning she delivered it, he lowered his offer per pound by half. Thought he had her over a barrel, but he didn’t know Mama. She decided to take the cotton the hundred miles to Jefferson herself, but Two-Maw talked her into asking Daddy.”

“Who’s Two-Maw?”

“My mother’s best friend, Elaine, like our second mother. Can’t remember who hung Two-Maw on her, but it fit.”

“Got it, go on.”

“Well, Daddy was a heathen back then and had a bad reputation of being a lay-about drunk.”

“What? Your father was a drunk?”

“No. That rumor got started when he ran into two of his War of 1812 buddies who happened to be hauling a load of whiskey. They brought the news that Andrew Jackson finally got elected President. A toast led to the three of them sleeping under their wagon early the next morning, drunk as skunks. Regrettably, Red River County’s known for its wagging tongues.

“A couple of weeks later, two of the church ladies visited Grandma Buckmeyer—I never knew her—to let her know what had happened. Guess they thought she could turn him around before it was too late. Who knows? Is there ever an excuse to go tattling?

“Anyway, back then Daddy hunted and trapped and fished mostly—he hated sod busting—so he worked all night. Of course, he walks out of his bedroom rubbing sleep from his eyes in the middle of the afternoon. But trust me, there’s not a lazy bone in the man’s body. The old biddies fanned the gossip flames.”

“So you mother hired your father to go with her?”

She nodded. “He’d seen her the first time like five years before and found out she was a widow. Knew about her vow. From what I’ve heard, everyone in the valley knew about it.”

“What had she vowed?”

“Not to marry again without her father’s blessing. She’d run off and married Rebecca’s father without it.” Her words faded, and she looked a million miles away. He could figure out what she must be thinking and reached over to pat her hand.

Bless her sweet heart. History had obviously repeated itself.

“Anyway.” She turned back and smiled. “Granddaddy lived in Memphis. Daddy said he wanted to come courting before, but figured he’d get her father’s blessing first. Then his mother got sick and died in the spring of that year, 1832.

“He told me he was a bit afraid of what my grandfather would say, him being a Memphis judge and all.” She chuckled. “The only time I ever heard him admit to being scared of anything.”

He loved listening to her. “So she’s thinking he’s a no-good. How come she hires him anyway?”

“Two-Maw convinced her he’d at least be another gun. He’d been with Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans. So Mama figured with no whiskey around, he’d have to stay sober and he might be some protection.”

“So sparks flew?”

“Not at first from the stories. She’d been making it with two little ones on her own for ten years, and didn’t cotton to Daddy always telling her what to do and how to do it. She admitted to staying mad most of the trip.” Mary laughed.

“Thing was, Daddy knew the best way to do things. For instance, he wanted to go the long, safer way across the Sulphur on the ferry, but she insisted on the shorter way through the Cuthand bottoms.”

“Cuthand? That a river?”

“No, a settlement. A young Indian boy guiding some early explorers had some fingers sliced off by a French soldier. Grew up to be the chief, but he carried the name Cuthand the rest his life, I guess. So anyway, they had to cross the Sulphur River and two branches of White Oak Creek.

“Daddy’s driving the lead wagon and told her to wait, and he’d come back and drive her team over. The short story is he made it, she got stuck and spent a day and a half in the middle of the creek.” She laughed again.

Loving that she seemed so light and free when she’d been so stressed...since he knew her, he enjoyed hearing her family history. She appeared to love the telling as much as he loved the listening.

“What did Henry do?”

“Tried everything he could, then got Mama and Rebecca to build a signal fire to call in some help.”

“Were they that close to civilization?”

“No, he was calling Indians.”

“Really? Why would he do that?”

“The Caddo weren’t like the Comanche or Apache or the other more savage tribes; these were peaceful family men, pretty much like regular people. I like them a lot.”

“So they came to help?”

She grinned real big. “But they wanted a mule and Levi’s long gun, and Mama couldn’t stand parting with any of her animals or asking Levi to give up his gun—it was inherited, belonged to his dead father—so Daddy loans her his mule and gun. Didn’t mention then that General Jackson had given the musket to him, but he’d have done about anything to please her.”

Jethro knew what that was like. The more time he spent with

Mary, the more he wanted her, and to never let her go.

“Is that when she fell in love with him?”

“No, she said he kept making her mad, bossing her around, even though she later admitted her way would have been disastrous.”

Was that it?

“She told me when they reached the Titus Trading Post, it was like the worst and best day of her life. That’s when her wall started crumbling, and she admitted to herself she loved him the next day at Captain Dangerfield’s Spring.” Mary chuckled. “If I could have just been there. Levi... Wait, let me back up.”

“Please do, I’m lost. Why was it the worst day?”

“Andrew Titus, the trading post’s proprietor, told Mama the big gun buyers were leaving Jefferson in three days, something to do with the price of lint. Anyway, she’s out in the wagon, crying, about ready to turn back, but decides she’s come that far, she must go on. But Daddy and Levi and Rebecca were all lollygagging inside...Mama getting madder by the minute.

“Finally, here came Rebecca with an armload of stuff Daddy had brought her. Only made Mama madder, like what little bit of anything she could afford once she sold her cotton wouldn’t mean anything now.” Mary took time to breathe, wagging her head and obviously relishing her story.

“Rebecca tells Mama that Daddy has got her something, too. But by then Sister and Daddy were in cahoots. She’d gotten him to buy a gold ring. She loved him like a daddy already—like Francy loves you. Since her daddy died before she was born, she’d never had one. So anyway, Mama was stewing, and Levi starts unhitching her mules.”

He leaned back. “Oh no, I can see how that’d go over.”

“Well, that’s about right. She had four total, two for each wagons, and they’re pulling like two tons each. She started thinking Daddy had gone and traded her cotton for all the stuff he’s bought. She was just about to give him a piece of her mind—or maybe she already did—but here comes fourteen-year-old Levi with a new team of four mules.”

“Where did he get them?”

“Daddy bought them to try and get her to Jefferson before the buyers left. He’d carried coin and jewels in his honey jars. That’s another long story.”

The ship’s bell clanged the hour. He pulled out his pocket watch. “Did you tell our daughter what time we’ll be reading?”

She smiled. “You like calling her that, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do. Almost as much as I’m going to love calling you my wife.”

“I’ve been doing all the talking, how about another question?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I’ve been wondering...”

“What, Mary, you can ask me anything, any time.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight



“Why is it that you haven’t asked me about Edward?”

Why indeed. Was she crazy as a Bessie bug? Why had Mary brought the man up? She hated it that she had, but still, Jethro must be wondering. It’d drive her crazy if she were him.

Pursing his lips, he raised both eyebrows slightly then shrugged. “I’ve wanted to a dozen times, but I was there when you gave back the bracelet.”

She regretted it even before giving it voice, but the question needed asking. “Aren’t you concerned that I’m still in love with him?”

“I’ve thought about it, but the Bible says Eve was deceived, just as you were. Twice now. I know my heart, and I love you. I will until the day I die.”

There he went again, saying the right thing.

Instead of badgering her with questions about Edward, asking her how she could have been so stupid to let him seduce her. But no—right away, he goes to figuring out an excuse for her bad choices and actions.

Deceived.

She pondered on it. It was the truth. She had been. Both times, like he said.

Then straight to talking about how much he loved her. “Why do you?”

He grinned. “Love you?”

She nodded rapidly.

“I’ve examined my own heart. Once I thought I’d found true love with Meiko, but compared to what I feel for you, that was only lust.”

A waiter drew near. Jethro held his coffee cup up then nodded toward hers.

“No, thank you, I’m fine.”

He took a sip of the hot brew then smiled. “I admit your beauty drew me to you—like so many others—but peerage. That’s the best way to explain it.”

“How so?”

“Not since my mother have I known a lady who I considered an equal.”

Equal? Had he called her his equal? “How’s that? Tell me more, kind sir.”

“You, sweet lady, are my equal in so many ways. You issue orders, and folks love to carry them out. You drive a hard bargain, but you’re fair.” He grinned. “Your intelligence. You are not just full of book knowledge, you balance that with solid common sense. Have I mentioned your beauty?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, looks fade, but not your inner beauty. Your heart is so precious toward others—like you forgiving Lanelle so easily. You are such an incredible lady, Mary Rachael. You giving Mis’ess Clinton the bracelet shocked me true, but telling her—and more so him—that you were tired of it. And then not telling her where you got it. Such class.”

Studying her hands in her lap, she replayed the scene in her memory. She had no idea it had impressed Jethro so much. “Thank you.”

“I don’t know of any other who would have handled that evening with such grace or dignity.”

Was he just flattering her? A master manipulator? Then...what if he was? She liked it whatever anyone wanted to call it. “Thank you, again.” She looked up. “Do you know why I agreed to go with you?”

He shook his head.

“I couldn’t think of another way to see him. I wanted to tell him about the baby, but his wife and children changed my mind. I’d convinced myself his father had arranged for him to marry some socialite. Wasn’t that a joke on me? I expected him to send the young lady packing and make me an honest woman.”

Why had she told him that? What was he doing to her?

He stared, but his face remained blank, unreadable. And he didn’t say anything. Had she broken his heart? Could he still love her now? Peerage, he said. She didn’t think so. When he’d found out what Meiko really was, he didn’t want her anymore.

How could he think Mary was any better? She’d given it away and got pregnant for her gift. Even now, would she run to Edward if he were to walk through the dining room door?

Hadn’t that been what she’d hoped for in her heart of hearts all along?

That he’d show up and save her from Jethro?

Edward never would, that was for sure and for certain. A liar and adulterer. Who wanted him? She needed to think. Where was Francy when she needed her? She hugged herself. “I best check on our little ladies.”

He stood and extended his hand. “Of course, I’ll arrange our dinner in the room if you like. Half hour? Will that be enough time?”

“Should be, yes. See you in our sitting room then.” She put her hand into his, and he pulled her to her feet, but held on.

“I love you.”

She nodded, but didn’t say anything, only stared into his eyes. He opened wide the windows of his soul to her.

He spoke the truth. He did love her.

But would it be enough?



Jethro made the arrangements for the noonday repast, then waited in the hall until the server brought the cart. At exactly the prescribed time, he tapped on her door.

Francy opened it wide enough to stick out her head. She tried to keep a straight face but couldn’t contain her smile totally. “Yes, sir, may I help you?”

He chuckled. “Anyone in there hungry?”

From further inside came Mary’s voice. “I am. Kiss your way in if you have to.”

“Yes, Daddy, kiss me.” Francy closed her eyes and puckered.

He gave her a big smack on her forehead then grabbed her up and threw her over his shoulder like a sack of oats. Balancing the wiggling little varmint, he pulled the cart inside. She giggled. Mary laughed.

Even the baby seemed to catch her big sister’s mirth. Susie smiled and squealed and gasped.

He loved it. Someday, Lord willing, it would be his own babies, except these definitely were already his. God gave them to him. Well, at least they would be as soon as Henry Buckmeyer gave his blessing.

Oh, Lord, soften the man’s heart.

After the meal—a nice grilled ocean perch with a walnut salad and preserved peaches—he and Mary took turns reading.

Her new mother was quite the novelist. He was impressed. Francy volunteered to lie down with her little sis, as though Mary had suggested it this time. Pleased him, but he didn’t want to continue the Clinton conversation.

Trouble plagued him enough over the man without her talking about him. Could she possibly still love the cheat? Love. What did she even know of love? Twice now, she’d been deceived, even though she was so smart.

Maybe her problem fell in trusting her heart. So soon after she lost Caleb, that cad seduced her, and now here Jethro was spouting his love.

He had to convince her. Rescuing her and her baby—both her babies—should be enough, but he’d do whatever it took. Many would

say he and Moses sure chose a couple of doozies. He grinned.

His choice though, the unbelievably beautiful and smart and hard-headed one, would make him the happiest man in the world, if only she'd believe him.

He'd never give up.

One day, no matter how long it took, she'd love him like he loved her.

The ten-year-old closed the sitting room door. Had that been prearranged too? Mary smoothed her dress then faced him. "I believe our oldest is conspiring against us."

He had to laugh. "What now?"

"Earlier, while I fed the baby, she told me our bed was just too crowded, that I should bunk with you and give her and Susannah some room."

He tried to stifle the belly laugh, but couldn't completely. "I'm good with that; steam boat captains can marry folks, same as ministers."

"No, we'll wait, but I do like how you think."

He agreed, then nodded toward the closed door. "Did you put Francy up to this?"

"No, sir, not at all. Just more of her plotting and planning. I can't imagine what that girl is going to be like in five years."

"I can. A lot like you, maybe some like me, but bless God, we got her before someone else found out she wasn't a boy named Shorty."

"Amen." She leaned forward and took his hand. "Thank you, Jethro. I want you to know, no matter what, I'll make you a good wife, be a good mother to your children. Speaking of little ones, how many might you be wanting past these three God's already plunked into your lap?"

A warmth spread from her fingers to his heart. He wanted to pull her to him, smother her with kisses, carry her across the hall to his bed, but he'd waited this long. It had to be right, get her father's blessing. He leaned back. "However many He wants to give us."

She put her hands in her lap then threw him a quizzical grin. "Tell me, I've been wondering. How did you and Moses Jones become partners?"

"After my father lost it all, I went to the docks, day labor. Back-breaking work, but paid good. I'd been noticing this big Irishman for about a month, usually the first guy hired of a morning. He toiled so hard and was so strong, but what I noticed most of all... His character...it impressed me. Never knew such a man. Purely good, he was. Carried his Bible every day and read it at every break."

"But you weren't even a Christian then, right?"

"That's correct. He told me later he hadn't paid much attention to

me or anyone, said he's just trying to make a living. Then this one idiot started coming to the docks. For some reason the guy took a dislike to Moses. Probably hated it that if anyone got work, it'd be Jones.

"One morning, we were sitting around. None of the bosses had showed up yet, and idiot man took to running his mouth at Moses. He ignored him, but I had about all I could take. So I started in on him, using words he probably didn't have a clue what they meant. Guess he figured out I insulted his parentage.

"Next thing I know, he's got me down, flaying my head. Moses stopped the fight, and we've been buddies ever since. Then when I saved enough to buy my teams of mules, I asked him to go in partners with me. We went to work on the Erie Canal, hauling freight. That's how we made enough to come west."

"How old were you two then?"

"I was eighteen, and he was twenty-one."

"And now?"

"Thirty-one, but thirty-two by the time we get to Texas."

"Oh, you have a birthday! When is it?"

"The twenty-second, but don't go and make a big deal of it. And you are...?"

"Almost twenty-one."

Tickled him somewhat that she was still wanting to be older. Instead of 'I'm twenty,' she wanted to add the extra year as though he couldn't do the math.

"What are you grinning about?"

"Nothing worth mentioning. Tell me more about your father."

She studied him a moment then must have decided against pressing him over what had tickled him. For the next quarter hour, she told him about Henry Buckmeyer. How the man had traded his way to vast wealth.

Well, that and a lot of hard work. Most didn't want to do what it took to gather, clean, and double-wash bois d'arc seeds, then haul them to St. Louis.

Henry did it though, until the market played out. And who would've thought to buy every headright—strange name for land grants—he could get his hands on? What foresight. Mary certainly fell close to the tree.

But from all she said, the man's generosity made him rich. How many times had Moses told him, you can't out give God, partner.

Quite evident she loved her daddy very much. That he'd not returned her letter, written back to her, broke her heart. She used stubborn and all its derivatives, coupled with pride, more than a few times in her narrative.

It just didn't add up though. The man she described would have gone to the four corners of the world for his firstborn.

And that's what she was, even if Mary claimed his adopted daughter Rebecca was Mister Henry's favorite. Then again, he could understand that. Would Francy always be his favorite?

"My second sister, CeCe—short for Cecelia—saved his and Levi's life."

Why hadn't he been paying better attention? He replayed the last of her story, but couldn't piece the puzzle together. At least he'd heard the last sentence. "How's that?"

"Mama was big and pregnant, and Levi was about to bust a gut to get in the war, but Daddy wouldn't leave her. They would have been at the Alamo otherwise. Instead, they waited for her to deliver, and after everything was fine, they joined up with Houston. That's also when Levi met Wallace Rusk. So CeCe coming late saved Daddy's and Levi's lives."

"Mary, have you ever considered that maybe your father didn't get your letter?"

She raised one shoulder slightly. "I've got another one started, but how do you put what's happened to me in a letter? It's all so horrible. Daddy, you were right, Caleb Wheeler was...." She smiled. "Lanelle says we shouldn't speak evil of our dead. But we both know now. Daddy probably knew then what kind of man—except he called him a boy.

"Anyway, then John asked me to marry him. When I say no, he sells out to you and Moses, and then...well...." She rubbed her tummy. "So how can I put all that in a letter? If he didn't hate me before, he will now for sure."

"No, Mary Rachel. How can you say that?" He chuckled. "He's your father, and he loves you. The man you've been describing... He'll welcome you with open arms. My only concern is how he'll see me."

"I think he'll like you. And once I tell him about the baby, he'll agree with our plan."

Jethro hoped so; he couldn't bear the thought of losing her—or Francy.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Panama City had grown, but unlike the last time Mary crossed the isthmus, only she and Jethro and the girls, no freight to see to. The stage took a day, a rough one at that, but nothing like the dread that the looming trip across the Gulf of Mexico held. Then to her surprise, the trip proved smooth sailing, no retching her guts out, nothing like in '51.

Had Caleb talked her into being seasick, so he could spend time with Lanelle? She put that thought away. Whether from being pregnant or tossed about, it made no never mind now. Not anymore. She loved her cousin, and refused to hate Susannah's father.

New Orleans and its special frantic pulse, alluring and contagious, came into view only five easy days later. But Clarksville loomed too close for the port to pull her into its excitement. Henry Buckmeyer. Only six days away. Five up the Big Muddy to Jefferson, then another on the stage to home.

Did her daddy still own the Belle? He'd talked of selling it.

And was the Gateway to Texas still home?

Could be she'd become a vagabond, doomed to wander like Cain. She had ties to San Francisco, but with... She rubbed her belly. Would anyone dare to put a Scarlet Letter on her chest like Hawthorne's heroine?

Or might she bear a mark like Adam's oldest?

Once, she thought California would be her new home, but now she didn't know. Wouldn't even dare at that point to say she'd ever even see it again. Feel the cool breeze blow in off the ocean again. Do battle with some miner over his bill, then weigh out her hard-won dust. Did she want to go back?

What would Jethro think? How would she react the first time Edward came around or saw his baby? That couldn't, wouldn't happen.

The steamer's wheel twirled backwards harder as it neared the dock. Jethro slipped his hand into hers. "Do you know a good hotel?"

"There's several, but let's see if we can book passage on to Jefferson. I'd rather press on if we can."

He leaned in close. "Let's stay a day or two. Do some shopping."

“Why? Is there something you need?”

He squeezed her hand, then glanced at her midsection. “Maybe some new dresses for you and Francy.”

She nodded, her old ones had been fitting a bit tight of late, best not to advertise her condition to the whole Red River Valley. Then a horrible thought smacked her heart. Gwendolyn could never know about Edward. She loved her sister, but not her or Cecelia or Bonnie. No bad example, but most, they could not keep a secret!

No telling who they might share with. That’s all she needed; one of them to let it out that Mary Rachel came home all big and pregnant by some strange man. No one’s business, actually. Maybe she and Jethro should....

No. She really wanted her daddy’s blessing this time. Before she wed, not after the fact. What could he say but yes, though. What if he said no?

Easing closer to Jethro, she stood shoulder to shoulder watching the wharf’s activities.

Her musings brought reminders of the stories her mother told. How nervous she’d been about seeing Grandfather after ten years; what he’d say to Daddy; even if he was still alive. Oh, God. She hadn’t even thought of that. Her heart beat faster and harder.

What would she do if... No. That wasn’t possible. She would not even entertain the thought.

If only her story could end as well as Mama’s.

“You just swallow a bug?”

She looked at her soon-to-be husband. “No, why do you ask?”

He gave her his little boy semi-grin smirk. “That sour face. That’s what it looked like to me.”

“I’m sorry.” She pulled the girls closer and hugged them with her free hand. “Just thinking about home.”



What would her hometown hold? Or rather, five miles south as the crow flew from Clarksville proper. Jethro had been doing a lot of thinking on that topic himself.

More than the three-story mansion she had painted such a vivid picture of, he would know the place anywhere. Not even with her reassurances, could he swallow his apprehension of meeting the man.

In his mind, Mister Henry Buckmeyer looked as big as the Lone Star State. Folks wanted him to stand for office. The last governor himself had showed up and wanted to know Buckmeyer’s intentions before he committed to running for a second term. Then promising to back Mister Henry at the end of his term if he wanted.

Had he ever known a man like Mary's father? Once, his own had been a titan of commerce, but his flaws brought him down, hard and fast. To hear Mary tell it, her father sounded like a living saint.

What kind of man bought slaves to free them? One who'd also killed ten men. Jethro ran a finger under his collar.

Saints didn't do that.

Mary's laughing drew his attention. She pointed at him. "So, did you swallow a bug?"

Grinning, he remembered that each and every killing proved completely justifiable—at least according to his firstborn. "No, ma'am, just a little thinking of my own." He lifted her hand and threaded his arm through hers, setting it back down atop his.

Still, the men lay dead in their graves all the same because they crossed Henry's path.

Then, to make things worse, she had told him about Levi Baylor and Wallace Rusk. They didn't keep track of their body count any longer, or so they said. Had all of them been just as right about Caleb Wheeler?

Would they see him as an interloper wanting to wed their poor widowed sister; put him six feet down for good measure?

Even with misgivings and the extra day in New Orleans, he found himself in Clarksville, Texas, resting not so comfortably in the Donoho Hotel a mere seven days later. His love's hand so close, yet out of reach.

After a brief discussion, she'd insisted on spending the night there, and hiring a buggy fresh in the morning. He'd been easy to convince.

She scurried like a bunny up the stairs and waited around the corner for him to bring the key. Francy worked with Susie, walking behind her, holding both hands, determined to teach her to climb stairs.

That night while he tried to find sleep all alone, across the hall again from the females he loved more than life, he rehearsed what he would say.

After a half-dozen failed starts and too many futile attempts piled high in the corner of his mind, a scripture in Matthew came to mind. He rolled out of bed, lit the lamp, and found the passage. Reading the verses aloud, he kept repeating the words until they settled in his heart.

...Take no thought how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.

Not exactly but proved close enough to calm his troubled soul. No need to worry. God would give him the right words at the right time. He just hoped the Lord knew the man would surely be worse than an

inquisitor.

Jethro slipped back into bed and before he could repeat the scripture again, he slept.



The sun's rays warm and bright on Mary's face opened her eyes. Or could it have been Susannah's rooting that woke her? She settled the baby at her breast then smiled—until she realized.

It was tomorrow.

Today—the day—had arrived. Her heartbeat sped up with each thought of seeing her family. Her little sisters, Mammy and Chester, Rebecca and Wallace. They could already have a baby themselves. Wouldn't that be fun?

Jean Paul and Laura... Had he got up the courage to marry her yet? Two years. Mary had been gone a long time. And all the little boys, brother Houston and cousins Charlie and Bart. How old would they... She gasped. The little wild man Charlie would be thirteen, getting to be a man, and her little brother: nine. Wow.

And Mama May. Mary had been the first to fall in love with the novelist. Working with her, transposing her stories had been like a dream. After not having a mother for six years, losing her at the tender age of eleven, Mary found it easy, confiding in May, asking her questions—a very special lady indeed.

She missed her.

Reading through all her books again had helped some though. The east coast newspapers had followed THE GRANGER's success, sold out its first edition before they'd even returned from Europe.

She'd missed that excursion, the trip of a lifetime. Stupid, her staying to run off with Caleb. Saying goodbye to her daddy on the porch that morning traipsed across her mind, how she'd stood up to him.

Thinking she was so grown.

Oh, how she prayed Jethro was right, that Daddy would open his arms wide.

Father God, please, let it be so.

Dressed and downstairs, her own breakfast smelled so good, but she could only pick at it. Francy, too, ate like she had caught her and Jethro's apprehension. As always happened, a good third of the Donoho's patrons nodded at her, but no one who knew her too well.

Bless God, none of them approached.

Had she matured so much they weren't exactly sure?

Possibly, they'd mistaken her for Rebecca sitting there in broad daylight with a strange man and two unknown children. Maybe

Francy's age threw them off. Oh well, whatever it was, Mary appreciated the privacy.

She would not lie and neither would she be rude.

The truth would come out soon enough.

Just not this day.

Should have insisted on room service.

Jethro put his napkin beside his half-eaten plate. "The horse and buggy's waiting outside."

"Yes, it is." She forced a smile. "Actually, you just told us that not three minutes ago." How could he be more nervous than she was?

"Right. So are we ready?"

"Yes, sir. I believe we are." She stood, took the baby from Francy, then looked at him and managed a real, albeit weak, smile. "Shall we?"

He jumped to his feet. Soon she traveled the road she knew so well. Several new saw-board homes had sprung up along the way, until the buggy reached her father's property. She pointed to the pile of rocks that had been there her whole life, and she couldn't remember when he said he claimed this block.

"How much farther? We getting close?"

"About another three miles before we turn off the road."

"Wow, how much land does your family have?"

She shrugged. "I don't know, forty something here and half again that much along the Llano River."

"Forty what?"

"Thousand acres, silly. Each headright is over four thousand, and between him and Levi, they bought all they could get their hands on."

"You're talking over sixty thousand acres, Mary. How much of it is in cotton?"

Staring at him, she burst out laughing. "How would I know? Only thing I do know about cotton is that I hate picking it."

"You had to pick cotton?"

"Yes, sir. I've done it all. Planted it, chopped it, picked it, and skinned the mules. Once upon a time, Daddy worked me hard, then. ..." She giggled at the look on his face. "It wasn't all that bad. We all helped, and he made it fun. Then the more slaves he bought and freed, the more he wanted us girls to concentrate on our studies."

"After he emancipates them, he hires them?"

"Yes, sir. Pays a good wage. Lets them build their own home if they want. And there's a bunkhouse, too, for the ones who don't." She spotted the lane that led to the big house; filled her lungs, then exhaled slowly.

The hour she been dreading was upon her. She pointed again. "That's our turn. Right past that little block of plowed black dirt."

Jethro turned where she told him to, then fell deathly silent. Seemed his lips moved some. Was he praying? Good idea. Past the eight, down by the smokehouse, then up through the seventy-five acres that once was the home block.

Steady climbing got them up on the hill, the bottoms stretched out for miles to the north—all the way to the Langford Creek.

Home.

Her bottom lip quivered. Even Francy sat silent. Movement to her left must have drawn him to look, too. A gang hoeing on the far end. One of them took off running toward the house. She nudged Jethro.

“Pick up the pace, please, sir.”

“Why? Someone after us?”

“No, that man who just now took off running is headed toward the house; I’d like to beat him there.”

He slapped the reins over the rent horse’s back, but the old boy had a mind of his own. She stiffened. Never could sneak up on him. Levi said as hard as he tried, he couldn’t either. On the other hand, Daddy always appeared just as the play-fighting got good.

Maybe he’d saved her over the years, but he sure could be a kill-joy.

Jethro slapped the reins again, with the same results.

She put her hand over his. “Never mind. We’ll be there when we’re there.”

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

The horse rounded the last corner. The water tower came into view first then the house’s top story. Her heart flipped, pounding against her ribs.

“Is this where your daddy lives?”

She looked back.

Francy sat wide-eyed, holding the baby.

“Yes, ma’am. This is where I grew up.” She had to swallow a wad of cotton before she cleared her throat and could go on. “That little house back a ways? That’s where I was born, but Daddy built the first wing pretty quick after that.”

She looked back again. The horse strained a bit climbing the last hill to the house. New Blue stood in the yard all bristled and barking.

She put two fingers to her lips and whistled. “Hey, Newly! It’s me.”

The dog abruptly stopped then raced toward her. The front door sprang open. Her father stepped out onto the porch. He took one look then bolted toward the buggy. “Mary Rachel! Is that you, Baby? You’ve come home!”

“Stop the buggy.”

Jethro did, and she climbed down, careful of her tummy, and ran toward him. Newly met her first. She bent enough to give him a quick

rub without ever taking her eyes off her father.

He loved her! He still loved her!

"Oh, Baby. You're home." Tears streamed down his cheeks. He slowed and held his arms out. She ran into his embrace.

"Daddy!" She sobbed and held him tight. "Daddy, I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you! You're home. Nothing else matters."



About like Jethro figured, except for the tears. He'd not expected the man to cry like a little girl. Francy stepped into the seat Mary had vacated, handed him the baby, straightened her dress, then took her back.

"Is that Mama's daddy?"

"It is."

"So that makes him my granddaddy. Think I should get out and go give him a hug?"

"Let's wait. They haven't seen each other in a while."

"Like me and Amos. I'm missing him something terrible. Can you believe it? I'll probably cry, too, once we get back, and I see him again."

Stifling a grin, he leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Maybe worse."

Folks stood on the porch, gawking at Mary and her father, then three young ladies burst from the confab and ran toward her, had to be Gwen, CeCe, and Bonnie. Mister Henry sure marked up his babies. Three boys cold trailed them.

What had to be the ranger himself, Levi Baylor and his Rose grinned, but only looked on.

Where was Wallace Rusk and Rebecca? He wanted to see for himself if it was possible for another female to be more beautiful than his Mary, except he liked the way her father put the Rachel with it.

Maybe he'd start calling her that, too.

Henry released his oldest to her sisters then turned his attention to Jethro. The man strolled toward him. Though tears stained his face, the steel in his eyes shown cold even from ten feet or better.

He threw a nod, smiled, and extended his hand. "Thank you for bringing my baby home."

Francy handed Jethro the baby then jumped down and ran around to the elder's side. "Hey, I'm Francis but everyone calls me Francy. Like fancy, isn't that too cute? I like it. So, sir, if you're my mother's daddy, then you're my granddaddy!"

She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him hard, while the

man screwed his face into disbelief, but patted Francy's back and pressed her with a one-handed hug. "Good to meet you, young lady." He laughed. "I'm Mary Rachel's father alright."

She turned from Henry. "This here's my daddy. His name's Jethro, and he and Mama are getting hitched as quick as possible after you say it's fine." She stepped back and put her hands on her hips. "We've come all the way from California just to ask you."

"All that way?"

"Yes, sir. I don't know why they couldn't figure out it'd be fine."

He looked from the girl to Jethro and smiled. Not exactly how he intended to spill the beans, but... Anyway, it'd do. He slowly let the breath out that he'd been holding, tightened his hold on Susannah, and climbed down. He extended his hand. "Like she said, Jethro Risen, sir. Pleased to meet you."

"So Caleb went and got himself murdered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Wasn't there. Mary Rachel knows more about it than I do."

The man he hoped would soon be his father-in-law touched Susie's chin and smiled. "She's beautiful. Your baby?"

He shook his head. "Caleb's, sir."

Before he could grill Jethro more, Mary Rachel and her sisters came for the baby and Francy. How could a gaggle of girls giggle and laugh so much while the tears still flowed freely?

Henry got swept up in the mob that now included the beautiful redheaded Rose and a lady who had to be Mama May. All moved like a swarm toward the house, his Francy in the midst with the young boys darting in and out, punching one another.

He followed close, thankful that he still drew breath, but the real test lay ahead.

Henry Buckmeyer hadn't even got warmed up. Jethro was sure of it, just like he knew the sun would set that afternoon. Hopefully he'd live to see it rise in the morning.

Chapter Thirty



Jethro drifted amongst the sea of strangers, speaking only when spoken to, saying as little as possible, while Mary Rachel—everyone called her by both her given names—laughed, hugged, and showed off Susannah and Francy.

The ten-year-old played the belle-of-the-ball part well for all her new aunts.

Dinner was served, although he had no idea when anyone had time to cook, by all the ladies. Jethro sat between his loves. The food tasted exceptional, but he still couldn't eat much. Then afterward, the men and boys cleared the table and washed the dishes—all the males—even Mister Henry took part.

Jethro tried but was restrained. Guests were not allowed, little brother Houston informed him.

Then the grand inquisitor and his lovely bride invited him and Mary Rachel into the library, except the invitation sounded more like a summons. Mama May took a chair next to her husband, who sat behind his desk.

How many times had Jethro's father done the same?

"Francy says you two came to get my blessing for your union."

The man didn't waste any words. Jethro liked that. "Yes, sir. That's correct."

Mary Rachel nodded. "We'd like to be married as soon as possible, Daddy."

He leaned forward. "Why the rush?"

Time had come for the hard part. Jethro put his hand over Mary Rachel's and waited for her to tell her father. He almost wished he could, but it was her story and her daddy.

"Daddy, Mama May..." She ducked her head. Tears trickled down her cheeks, then her hand went to her belly. "Please just say yes, and let's call the preacher."

Henry jumped to his feet and glared at Jethro. "What have you gone and done?"

"No, Daddy!" Mary Rachel raised her head, wiped her cheeks. "It's all my fault. I am with child, but Jethro's not the father."

"Then who is? And why isn't he the one who brought you home?"

“Sir, your daughter has been deceived, twice now; the first culprit has gone on to his reward. The other turned out to be a married man, and Mary chose not to inform him of her condition.

“I love her, sir. And with God’s help, I’ll be the best husband possible for the rest of our lives. I’ll provide for her, Susannah, and the baby coming. I hope to grow old with this lovely lady.”

“Oh, my darling girl.” Mama May burst into tears, coming around the desk, and hugged Mary. “I am so very sorry for all your heartaches, my precious.”

“Sweetheart?” Mister Henry sat back down and nodded toward him. “Do you love his man?”

She turned toward Jethro and smiled. “Yes, I do, Daddy. At first, I couldn’t stand him. He was too bossy.” She glanced at her father then back. “He’s a lot like you, Daddy. He’s so wise and knows so much. Claimed his love would be enough, that I didn’t have to love him. But...” She turned back to her hero. “I’ve definitely fallen deeply in love with him. You are a good man, Jethro Risen, and I do love you.”

His heart swelled until his chest was sure to burst.

She loved him.

He swam in the pools of her eyes and drank her in. She’d confessed it to her father. She loved him. He never expected it so soon, wanted to jump up and do a jig or shout or something. Instead, he rose.

Mama May stepped away, and gave him room, tears flowing.

He kissed her cheek then knelt beside her. “Praise God.”

She threw her arms around his neck and wept. “I love you. I do, Jethro!”

He only smiled, couldn’t speak. His mouth must be about to split his cheeks in two. He’d never been so full of joy in his whole life. And things were about to get better! How could he be so blessed? How could God love him so?

“Ladies.” Henry stood. “If you would be so kind, I need a few minutes alone with Mister Risen.”

Mama May took Mary Rachel’s hand and helped her stepdaughter up. She had seemed on the verge of interjecting herself into the conversation several times, but only blew her husband a kiss.

Like the dutiful wife she appeared to be, she ushered Mary Rachel out. The heavy oak door closed. Jethro stiffened his back and faced his last obstacle to the desire of his heart.

“It’s my understanding that you and Mary Rachel are owners of a Mercantile.”

“Yes, sir. My partners and I bought out John Wheeler’s half when he went north.”

“Tell me about your partners.”

“Moses and I are equal, and Elijah Eversole has a smaller portion,

twenty percent. And then a couple who'd been helping Mary with the store traded their shop for a percentage of our part in the Mercantile."

For the next few minutes, he filled in the man on his relationship with Moses, Elijah and the Wingates.

"You mentioned with God's help. Are you a believer?"

"Yes, sir. I was lost when I first met your daughter." He chuckled. "Probably why she took no shine to me and my arrogant attitude. But now I'm found, blood bought, and heaven bound."

"Been baptized?"

"Yes, sir. Have a Methodist preacher, Brother Paul, who accepted that job. He likes giving Bibles away, and I've been doing my best to keep his supplies up."

"So you and your partners have a gold claim?"

"Yes, sir. That's right."

"I've heard the easy pickings are gone. Is that why you bought into my baby's store?"

"No, sir, not at all. We're hard rock miners, and I bought the store for Mary's sake. John wanted out. He loved her, guess every man who knew her did. But she wouldn't marry Caleb's cousin.

"He said he couldn't stand being around her, hurt too much. She wanted to borrow money to buy us out, but by then, I was smitten myself, and..." He shrugged. "The Lord had sent Francis and her brother Amos to me and..."

"How's that?"

"When I first met them, Amos—he's sixteen—was dressing his sister as a boy. She went by Shorty. Dirty enough to fool me. But the Lord spoke to my heart that she needed Mary." Jethro chuckled. "What a day that was."

"You're rambling, son. Let's get back to your mine."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"What is it producing? You and your partners making wages?"

Jethro smiled. So that's what the man wanted to know. "Much better than that, sir. It's been successful beyond my dreams. We have over fifty thousand on deposit, not counting the five kegs of nuggets that the bank is holding in its vault for us. So, yes, sir. You could say we've struck it rich."

Henry smiled. "So you don't need her store?"

"No, sir, but she loves it." He grinned. "She's got about the best business sense—man or woman—around. Drives a hard bargain, but is fair to a fault."

"You been married before?"

"No, sir."

"Sired any children?"

"No, sir."

“Bother you she’s carrying another man’s child?”

“Of course it does. But I don’t know how I could love Francy more, and Susie’s little smile melts my heart. How can I not love this baby as well? She’s innocent.” He grinned. “I’m in love, sir. Your daughter’s condition is regrettable, but it’s also why she agreed to come here with me. I knew she needed to reconcile. She was sure you hated her.”

“What?”

“I told her that couldn’t be true. But she never would’ve come or agreed to marry me, if there hadn’t been a time element due to the pregnancy. So I count it a blessing.”

“What are you planning on doing with your money?”

“I’ve put half of my shares into trust for the orphanage we’re building. I found this little valley, a little over five hundred acres and bought it. Carpenters were just starting on the main building when we left. If I can be reconciled with my father, I want to open a miners’ bank, get him to California to help me run it on the grubstake principle.”

“Wouldn’t think the gold rush would’ve produced many orphans.”

“You’d be surprised the number of kids living on the streets. God sending Francy is what started the wheels turning. Plan on setting up a dairy on the property for the kids to help with, teach them to work and a means to support themselves. Above all, show them God’s love.”

“Commendable.”

He held a finger up. “Oh, I almost forgot the newspaper; I bought half-interest in the Sacramento Herald, then placed an order for a thousand New Testaments and five hundred complete Bibles.

“The editor accepted side print orders to make ends meet. So far, he’s delivered a hundred of the New Testaments to Brother Paul, plus getting the rag out weekly.”

Henry shook his head. “Are you for real, son? Either you’re a saint or the best confidence man I’ve ever met.”



Mary Rachel stood, then walked into the hall; the door remained closed. She hurried back to her chair at the kitchen table. “What could they be talking about for so long?” She looked to Mama May.

“Shouldn’t we get on back in there?”

Her new mother grinned. “It’s only been a few minutes, darling. Try and relax, drink you tea.”

Miss Jewel extended her hand across the table and patted Mary’s. “You know you can trust him, Baby. Your daddy? He’ll always do what’s best for you.”

Was that what had her in knots?

She'd been so confident that he'd say yes once he knew the situation. But now that she knew her heart... How could she have been so blind? Why had it taken so very long for her to see the truth when it languished right there in front of her?

Poor Jethro.

Praise God he proved patient and persevered.

She loved Jethro Risen. Now that she knew it, she realized that maybe on some level she had since that day in Miss Ling's parlor. After all, he stayed with her and didn't run after the China Doll.

But how could she have been so stupid and still let Edward have his way with her? He played her for the fool.

Standing again, she sat right back down. "Mercy, I should be in there with them. Those two are talking about my future after all."

Mama May nodded. "No. Your father wants time alone with your Jethro."

"But why can't I be in there? What's he going to say to him that I can't hear?" Mary Rachel looked back to the hall. "What if Daddy shoots him?"

"Oh, don't worry about that, dear. Your father hasn't shot anyone in years." She kept a straight face and turned sideways. "Ooops, seems we're wanted."

Mary Rachel jumped to her feet. Her father stood in the doorway, looking rather stern. He stepped to the side then followed her and Mama May back into his library. Jethro sat exactly where she'd left him.

She slipped into the same seat as before, next to him. Her heart pounded as she waited for her daddy to situate himself.

He had to say yes.

He could not deny her this.

Well, if he tried, would Jethro take her off and marry her anyway? Or would he leave her and the baby there and go back to San Francisco alone?

He slipped his hand into Mama May's. "Mary Rachel, no reason discussing what's done. You two are saying all the right things, and I believe you both. I also understand the urgency and appreciate its reasoning. Under different circumstances, I'd hope for more time, but... Yes, daughter. My answer is yes. I will bless your union."

Jumping up, Jethro whooped. He pulled her to her feet, wrapped her in her arms—but not too tight—and swung her around real easy. So precious for him to remember, be so mindful of her condition.

Stopping a twirl where he faced her father, he let her go with one arm. "Thank you, sir. I give you my word. You'll never regret this."

She snuggled in tighter, pulled Jethro closer. "Is tonight too soon, Daddy?"

“No, I’ll send Charley to fetch the preacher.”

“He old enough to go by himself?”

“Yes, do you think I’d send him if he wasn’t?”

“No, sir. Guess I’ve just been gone too long. Still think of him as a little kid. Can we let everyone assume the baby is Jethro’s, and that’s why we’re in a rush?”

Her father looked to his new wife, except she was not so new anymore to everyone else, only to Mary. Mama May nodded then spoke up. “Darling, there’s a fact your mother knew, as do I, about your paternal grandparents.”

“What about them? They taught at the university together, right?”

“That’s right, sweetheart. They did.” Her daddy looked straight at her. “But they were never married.”

“What? Why?”

“Because my father already had a wife—and children. I knew him. He came to visit until I was seven, but after that, Mother... Well, she put a stop to it.”

Oh, Lord. Her choosing to run off... It opened her to repeat the sins of her mother and her grandmother. “So, what are you saying, Daddy?”

He smiled. That rather superior grin he gave those who dared challenge his authority. “We don’t owe anyone an excuse or an explanation. Jethro tells me you two are planning a trip to New York, going to find his father. We’ll get you two hitched tonight, and off you go.”

Her head spun, but he was right.

She didn’t owe anyone an explanation.

No one could change the past.

Her father had turned out just fine with no daddy. Her baby wouldn’t be fatherless at all, neither of them. They’d have Jethro. “You’re right, Daddy. We don’t have to say a word about anything other than how much we love each other.”

“And how happy we are.” Jethro squeezed her with the arm still around her waist.

She kissed him on the cheek then pushed him away. “Time for you to go visit with the men. We women have a wedding to plan.” She extended her hand toward Mama May who hurried to take it.

“Where’s Rose and my sisters?”



The sweet sound of a little piglet suckling brought Jethro totally awake. He snuggled in close to his wife’s back, kissed her cheek then peeked at Susannah. His baby girl; she’d know about her father; but

she'd always be his daughter.

Same as Francy and the new baby.

How very blessed he was that God filled his quiver so full.

Thank You, Lord.

Once the baby finished her breakfast, Mary Rachel eased her back into her crib then slipped back into bed. Her bed in her childhood room, but forever to him, it would be the most wonderful honeymoon suite.

He'd never forget it, or the night of nights he'd just enjoyed.

"Tell me, Mister Risen, any regrets?"

"Not at all, Mis'ess Risen. You regretting anything?"

"No, sir. Not me. I am the happiest woman in the world." She pressed her lips against his real soft and sweet, then scooted in closer and gave his bottom lip a little love nip.

All conversation ceased.

He stayed three days, two more than he wanted, but nowhere near the week everyone begged him for.

In the end, the whole clan came to town to see Mary Rachel and him off. A part of him thought maybe to keep anyone from asking questions, but whatever the reason, he'd never had so many people give him such a sendoff.

He loved it thoroughly.

If only such a reception awaited in New York.

Chapter Thirty-One



With his new bride snuggled next to him, Jethro didn't hate leaving on the stage at all. Nothing like the ride coming to Clarksville. No doubt or worry to weight his heart down. He and his love had been joined, and God saw the two as one. That's what His Word said, and he didn't have to be concerned.

Jethro would never let any man put Mary Rachel and him asunder.

The coach's constant swaying wore on him a bit, and Francy's wallowing, but soon enough the driver blew his bugle on the west side of Memphis. Thirty-four hours over three days on the hard bench proved a small price to pay.

After a short ferry ride, it was comfortable, wonderful, fast, smooth trains from then on, all the way to New York.

Twice the speed as the stage and no swaying back and forth. The dining cars and sleepers rivaled the steamboat accommodations. Far as he was concerned, trains were the only way to travel.

Five almost pleasant days with an educational layover in Washington—Francy loved all the history and Mary almost as much. Exactly nine days and five hours after leaving the Lone Star State, Jethro knocked on his mother-in-law's brownstone on Park Avenue.

"Wasn't it sweet of Mama May to offer her home?"

"Yes, absolutely. You're going to love Central Park."

The door swung open. An elderly woman, dressed like one of the maids who populated his childhood, smiled. "You must be Miss May's children? Come in, come in."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm Mary Rachael Whee—uh—Risen. " She covered her mouth and blushed. "Our stepdaughter. And my husband of twelve days, Jethro. I take it you received our telegram?"

"Yes, ma'am. I sure did, and your rooms are ready." She closed the door after Jethro. "I'm Eleanor, and I'm so pleased to meet you both. You let me know if there is anything you need while you're here."

That first evening, Jethro took his bride and daughters to a little bistro his father had taken him to on many occasions, but other than searching each face going and coming and while there, he made no other inquiries.

The next day he set out in earnest, starting at the last place of

employment Jethro knew his father had worked. Been years since anyone had seen him at the Plaza, where he'd once stood outside and greeted patrons after his fall from his lofty perch as the owner of Risen Bank and Trust.

The man still considered it so beneath him, but he opened the door for those who used to be clients, to put food on the table.

Before, Jethro had reveled in how much it must have hurt his pride, but now it nicked his heart that his father had been brought so low. Only one old bellhop even remembered him, but had no idea where he might have gone.

That afternoon he stopped in at the Pinkerton Detectives office on Madison. Yes, they had gotten his wire, but had no leads. Claimed they were still working on it, and Jethro had no doubts of that with the reward he offered.

He left the brownstone's number, and they promised to bring word of any news. He found Mary Rachel and his girls right where he'd shown them to meet him in Central Park, all ready for a nice little picnic.

He eased down on the quilt, and she and Francie started unpacking dinner. "You should see what all Miss Eleanor packed for us, Daddy! We're going to have a great picnic, and I helped make the chicken salad, too. It has apples and raisins and walnuts. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

His wife, oh how he loved her being that, handed him a few dried figs. "Any word?"

"No, he hasn't been at the plaza in years, and the detectives are making inquiries, but haven't come up with any real leads."

"Look, I made them."

"What, baby?"

Swinging a brown sack, she grinned ear to ear. "The cookies, I made them. With Miss Eleanor's help, of course, but it was mostly me. They're for dessert."

"I would bet they're delicious."

"Yes, they are. I had to taste when I was baking them to be sure, you know. I love them. And I already prayed, too. We all did. Blessed the food and that you'd find your father."

"Thank you, sweetheart."

"And you will, I just know it. Maybe tomorrow, but before we leave."

He so hoped she was right. Though he could never take back the hateful words he'd spoken, he could ask forgiveness. Offer him a new job, even a share of the Miner's Bank.

Except no word and the days dragged on.

As he'd also planned for the trip, he located a dairy, and made

arrangements to ship twelve, two-year-old bred Holstein heifers and an unrelated yearling bull to New Orleans. The cattle, as well as he and his family, would leave in two days, whether he found his father or not.

Gone so long already, he sensed an urgency to get back to California, the mine, and the orphanage.

Mary Rachel seemed just as anxious about the Mercantile. Francy loved New York and couldn't care less.

The morning of the last full day in the City broke bright and sunny, but by mid-morning, a storm rolled in and a light rain fell. A hint of autumn rode the air, but his heart found no relief. He'd had such high expectations.

From all appearances, his father had vanished. Perhaps lay dead in a pauper's grave or gone to who knew where for a new start.

Changing his contact information with the Pinkerton, he got the distinct impression they were more interested in the bigger rewards offered by the banks and in guarding New York's well-to-do.

Tired of watching the hacks and surreys speed by in the rain, he went to see what his ladies were about that not-so-fine morning. He found Mary Rachel sitting at Mama May's oversized desk reading, while Francy and Susie played dolls on the floor.

"Look, Daddy, this is Trudy. Miss Eleanor says I can take her with me because she's my favorite." She turned a knob on top the doll's hat. "She cries sometimes, then she's happy!"

"How about Trudy. Did you thank Miss Eleanor?"

"Yes, sir. 'Course I did."

Getting so big, Susie still seemed more interested in chewing on the little rag arm than loving on the make-believe babies.

"Seems our dinner date has been rained out."

Mary Rachel leaned back and pulled the lacy curtain a little open. The rain still fell, and hundreds of New Yorkers scurried by under their umbrellas. "Eleanor said she'd be happy to make us something here." She pulled the material farther back. "Oh, poor man. His carriage wheel fell off in the rain."

REUEL HELP HIM

"I'll be right back, dear."

He grabbed his hat, snugged it down tight, turned up his collar, and marched out not exactly sure how he could help. But if he knew anything, he recognized the voice of the Lord when He spoke.

If God told him to go, then he could help. The man had the wheel turned sideways on its axle trying to force it back on.

Jethro slipped beside him and grabbed the wheel. "Here, sir, let me help."

The man released the rim, straightened, then backed away.

“Jethro?”

For a heartbeat, the voice didn't register. Then it hit him like a load of black powder through hard rock. He faced the man. “Father, is it really you?”

“Yes, Son. It is.” The years had been hard on his face, but he still stood tall. Not nearly as arrogant or proud looking as the last time Jethro saw him.

“I came to find you, to apologize. I'm sorry, Father. Can you please forgive me?”

“No, son. I'm the one who lost everything and ruined our lives. I need to ask your forgiveness. You don't have anything to be sorry for.”

Where should he start? He had so much to say. He glanced at the wheel then the poor horse standing in the rain. “Is this your hack?”

“No, I hire it by the day.”

“Let's get it back to its owner then.” Jethro raised the axle while his father put the wheel back on, found the locking nut, then climbed aboard. The ride to the barn then back again in a hired covered carriage took less than an hour.

Then he found himself introducing his wife and babies to his father.

“This is great, I have two new grandpas!” Francy beamed.

After hugs, a change into dry clothes, and a hot meal, his ladies retired to the bedroom and left him and his father alone.

“Not right, me starting off saying you're wrong, Father, but I do need your forgiveness. All those hateful things I said to you the last time we... I was so wrong. I know I can't take them back, but I am sorry. I repent and ask you again to please forgive me.”

“Of course, I do, Son. But you spoke the truth, hard as it was to hear. I'd killed her same as if I poured the poison down her throat.”

“No. I've come to see she choose that way out. And only she is responsible for her choice, not you. I've forgiven her, and now, may I count us reconciled?”

“Nothing could please me more. It is so good to see you, Jethro. How long have you been living on Park Avenue? I pass by here almost every day.”

“Oh, we're just visiting.” He explained about his mother-in-law, her being a famous author.

“I've heard of May Meriwether. So this is her place?”

“Yes, sir. I came to New York for two reasons. To find you and to buy some milk cows. But before I tell you my plans, I need to ask a question first. Are you a Christian, Father?”

He nodded. “Not a very good one though. After your mother....” He closed his eyes and shook his head like he shouldn't have even mentioned her. “My parents were Quaker, but guess I took more to

their work ethic than religion. Then the money... Oh, Son, if you're as rich as you appear, beware of the love of money."

"I understand, but I've already wrestled that demon. With God's help, I overcame, don't love it. What was it you were going to say about Mother?"

"I was about your age when we married; did she ever tell you our union was arranged?"

"No, sir. How'd that come about?"

"Every deal I did turned golden. All the whaling ships I bought shares in came to port loaded with oil. I could do no wrong. I'd gained control of the bank earlier that year." He looked off, as though searching for the right words. "Your mother had caught my eye. Her father came to me for a loan.

"I knew the man and his very lovely daughter. She'd turned sixteen that year, belle of every ball she attended. He needed some of my money, and I needed, well wanted...." He shrugged. "I loved her, Jethro. I really did. I also longed to be more than the rich upstart. An established family I thought would settle me, us."

No wonder he'd never heard this before. "She agreed? To the arrangement?"

"Not at first, but her father convinced her. Without my money, he'd be ruined, and she... Well, let's just say your mother wasn't trained to be anything other than a lady."

"If you loved her, then why the..." Jethro didn't even want to voice what his father had been, maybe still was.

"Indeed, the why. She shared my bed until you came along. At first, I waited. Hoped she'd change her mind, but she told me no, under no circumstance. She never wanted to experience such pain ever again.

"That same night, we'd both drank too much, and she told me the only reason she married me was the money. I once thought she loved me some, but after that, I knew the truth. She didn't." He shook his head. "She loved you, Son. In her own way, much as she could, she loved you, especially after her daddy died."

"I'm so sorry, Father, but like a very wise friend of mine said, let's not speak evil of our dead."

"I agree." He sat up straighter. "So you bought a herd of milk cows?"

"Yes, sir, for the orphanage. Milk is in short supply in San Francisco, and it'll be a way to teach the children about work and let them help pay their way. Most of all, I want to show them God's love."

"Noble. Do you know anything about milking a cow?"

"No, sir, but Mary Rachel does, and we can hire help. We own a

dry goods store and half-interest in a newspaper, too. But our main source of income is the mine.”

His father chuckled. “You have a gold mine?”

“Yes, sir. And what I’d like to do is open a bank. We bought a barber shop that will be the perfect place for it, right across from our store.”

“A bank? You’ve got that much money?”

“Yes, sir. But I don’t want a regular one. I’m thinking of calling it Miners Bank, base it on the grubstake principle.”

His father pursed his lips and gave him a look. Jethro hadn’t seen that twinkle in his father’s eyes in forever. Then the old man smiled. “Like an investment bank, right?”

“Guess so. Put some of our money to work with ordinary folks. Give them a chance to hit it big.”

“Again, noble, Son. Do you know anything about banking?”

“Only what little I picked up from you.”

“Be careful who you invest in, lots of confidence men out there.”

“Yes, sir. That’s why I want you to run it for us. I’d love being partners with the great Boaz Risen.”

He put his hand over his mouth. Tears trickled down his cheeks.

“You interested, Father?”

He shook his head. “I’m snake bit, Son. My luck ran out years ago. Much fun as it sounds, you don’t want to partner up with me.”

Jethro jumped to his feet, his own tears, hot and salty, overflowing. “There’s no such thing as luck. Bible says all good things come from above. I’ve been blessed of the Lord, and you will be, too. The Blood of Jesus can break any curse. Come west with us, Father. I need you. Your grandchildren need you, too.”

He stood, wiped his cheeks, and extended his arms. Jethro walked into the embrace.

The Lord God Almighty had indeed given him every desire of his heart.

Blessed be the name of the Lord.

The End

'New' Texas Romance Characters

...alphabetically

Boyd, Francis 'FRANCY' – born October 28, 1842, an orphan God sends

Eversole, ELIJAH – born January 2, 1826, followed in his father's footsteps as a blacksmith, but loves inventing and building new machines

Jones, MOSES – born October 13, 1816, partnered with Jethro Risen in a gold mine

Risen, JETHRO – born September 22, 1830, partner of Moses Jones in a gold mine

Wheeler, CALEB – born August 29, 1828, John's cousin, weds Mary Rachel Buckmeyer

Wheeler, JOHN – born April 17, 1825, Caleb's cousin, Lanelle's brother

Wheeler, LANELLE – born September 22, 1830, John's sister, Caleb's cousin

Wheeler, MARY Rachel Buckmeyer – born August 3, 1833, Henry and Sue's oldest daughter, marries Caleb Wheeler

Wheeler, SUSANNAH – born October 6, 1851, daughter of Caleb and Mary

'Earlier' Texas Romance Characters

Spoiler Alert: Do not read if you haven't read earlier books in series

...alphabetically

Baylor, LEVI Bartholomew – born November 2, 1817 orphaned and reared by Aunt Sue, husband to Rosaleen ‘Sassy’ Fogelsong Nightingale Baylor; step-father to Charley Nightingale and Bart Baylor (Bold Eagle’s son), Daddy to Rachel Susannah, Henry Levi, and James Bowie Baylor.

Baylor, Rosaleen ‘ROSE’ (SASSY) Summer Fogelsong Nightingale – born August 24, 1823, married at fifteen in the fall of ‘38 to Charles Nightingale, stolen by Comanche summer of ‘39, rescued Oct 1844. Married Levi mid-December, 1844

Baylor, Bartholomew ‘BART’ – born July 20, 1845 to Rose and Levi, but blood son of Bold Eagle

Buckmeyer, Patrick HENRY - born March 6, 1798; killed a man at fifteen, fought in the Battle of New Orleans at sixteen. At thirty-four, he married Sue in 1832, became a widower in Dec ’44 at Houston’s birth.

Buckmeyer, Susannah ‘SUE’ Alicia Abbott Baylor – born May 15, 1803, married Andrew Baylor at eighteen in 1821, widowed at nineteen, twenty-nine when she married Henry in 1832

Buckmeyer children (Sue & Henry’s)

MARY RACHAEL – born August 3, 1833

GWENDOLYN Belle – born Nov. 29 1834

CECELIA Carol – born April 10, 1836

BONNIE Claire – born December 1840

Sam HOUSTON – born December 1844

Langley, LAURA is rescued at fifteen in 1844, stays on at Buckmeyers as teacher

Langley, LACEY Rose born November , 1844

Meriwether, CHESTER born October 7, 1803, was 5, about to be 6, when May was born, Married JEWEL (formerly Mammy) in 1851
(Chester’s Father – 60 in 1850? – 41 so born in 1808

Meriwether, JEWEL (formerly Mammy) the Buckmeyers’ cook after Henry rescued her and her son Jean Paul who also works for the Buckmeyers’

Meriwether, Millicent MAY – born August 23, 1808

Nightingale, CHARLES Nathaniel Senior - born 1805, married
Rosaleen Fogelsong

Nightingale, Charles 'CHARLEY' Nathaniel Junior - born Feb 27
'40

Rusk, REBECCA Ruth Baylor – born June 14, 1823 / 9 yrs old on the
trace in 1832; 21 in Nov. 1844 when she meets Wallace, marries him
in 1850 at age twenty-seven

Rusk, WALLACE – born 1819 (for month of year, needs to be 16 on
way to join Houston)

Historical Texas Romances



Five-Star Reviews for **Vow Unbroken**

With an intriguing plot line and well-developed characters, McAdoo, who's written nonfiction and children's fiction, delivers an engaging read for her first adult historical romance. --*Publishers Weekly*

After reading Caryl McAdoo's story of Henry and Susannah in "VOW UNBROKEN," I felt like I'd had another adventure with Tom Sawyer and Becky, this time as young adults. --Alan Daugherty: columnist *The News-Banner*

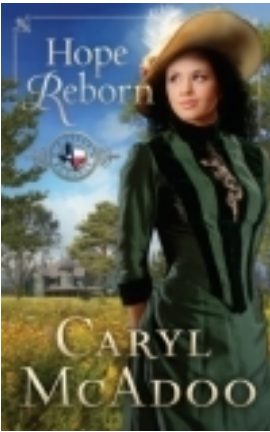


...and for **Hearts Stolen**

Get ready for a wild, uplifting, heart-tugging, page-turning ride. *Hearts Stolen* grabbed me at the start. Sassy's feisty, fighting spirit...I couldn't set it down. Burnt dinner, but forget eating, I ate this book up. This master storyteller weaves Texas history into a well-crafted plot with unforgettable and totally loved characters. --Holly Michael, author, *Crooked Lines*



...and Hope Reborn



With memorable characters, Caryl's signature humor, and plenty of adventure, drama, and romance, "Hope Reborn" is anything but fluff. A strong message of salvation runs through, but well within the storyline. Enjoyed a unique twist with May writing the stories of the previous characters – clever and fun!

--Pam Morrison, Tennessee reader

Contemporary Red River Romances



Five Star Reviews of

The Preacher's Faith...

Great story! Hope there's a sequel, and I'd love to see the artful dodger as a part of it. Maybe a reunion? And he could find his mother. Just love curling up in an afghan with a cup of cappuccino and reading Caryl's books! Keep on writing!

--Lenda Selph, Texas reader

This was my first book to read by Caryl McAdoo and I absolutely loved it. I will be reading more. I love the way she prays that her story gives God Glory and dedicates The Preacher's Faith to Him and His Kingdom...a good clean book to read. I was drawn into this story right from the start. I loved this book and can't wait for book two.

--Elizabeth 'Liz' Dent, Alabama reader

...and for Sing a New Song



Sing A New Song is a delightful breath of Christian air. Caryl eloquently brings her audience always nearer to God and opens readers to fresh ways of viewing Christian life and all it offers. The characters are loveable and humorous. The romantic tale, just as lovely, demonstrates Christian virtues best remembered. Illuminating, the story shares the Gospel beautifully. Samuel's sermons as well as the gorgeous lyrics of Mary Esther's songs fill our hearts with newfound worship. Truly an inspiring tale. Christian fiction in its best; a romantic love story that brings its readers closer to God. A treasure for sure.

--Christine Barber, author of *Broken to Pieces*

Contemporary Apple Orchard Romance



5-Star Reviews **Lady Luck's a Loser**

A very unique, witty plot. I couldn't put it down. I love that my favorite characters are still very much active at the end of the book only their relationships have changed. What a way for Dub to fulfill his promises to his deceased wife. Love, trust, forgiveness, and many emotions make for a well written book.

--Joy Gibson, Tennessee reader

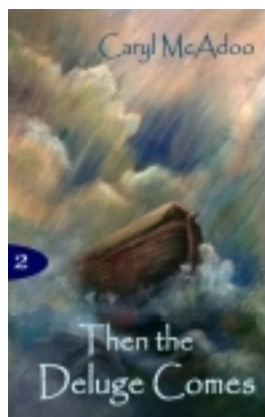
The Generations Biblical fiction

5-Star Reviews of **A Little Lower Than the Angels**



Caryl McAdoo used her research and knowledge of biblical scripture combined with an incredible imagination as a foundation to fill in the gaps of the story of Adam and Eve and their children. I was caught up in the story from page one to the ending. I particularly appreciated the "Search the Scriptures" section at the end which explains some of the Biblical clues for this work of fiction. I loved it and highly recommend it.

--Judy Levine, reader, Arizona



Deluge is the second book in The Generations Series, and if the books still to follow are as good as this one and the first one in the series are it is going to be an incredible series. The author has a way of breathing life and emotions into the characters that made me feel like I was on the sidelines watching their stories unfold. This is some of the best Biblical fiction that I have read and I look forward to the rest of the series. I was furnished with an e-copy of the book in return for an honest review.

--Ann Ellis, reader, Texas

And Coming Soon...

One and Done~A contemporary Christian Texas Romance / **July, 2015**

Samantha Danielle gets the break she's dreamed of—being a sportscaster! George Herman Walter Johnson, Gij for short, is smitten, but the lady must get right with the Lord to win the Texas Ranger's oldest-ever rookie.

Token of the Covenant

A Biblical fiction; volume 3 of The Generations series / **August 8, 2015**

Noah & Hattimas, Japheth, Ham, and Shem work on the ark tending God's animals thinking anyone can stand forty days and forty nights. They hope Noah heard right and the rain would stop. Then they could return to living on dry ground, but they discover that's only the beginning of their time on the ark.

Daughters of the Heart

A historical Christian Texas Romance, Book Five / **September, 2015**

Gwendolyn, Cecelia, and Bonnie come of age and the young men come courting from all over the state, but after seeing how devastated their father was when Mary Rachel ran off, the sisters enter into a pact never to break his heart.

SNEAK PEEK CHAPTER ONE for YOU below!

Acquiring a Wife~A contemporary Christian Texas romance / **October, 2015** / Ethan hires Jade to play a game of strategy and high finance as a ruse to see if his first impressions hold true and she's worthy of matrimony, but she proves no easy acquisition.

Children of Eber

A Biblical fiction; volume four of The Generations series / **November 2, 2015**

Abraham, Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac live out their stories.

Son of Many Fathers

A historical Christian Texas Romance / Book Six / Jan. 2016

Charley Nightingale comes home from the Civil War to find Lacey has run off, heading out to join the People of her father and Charley takes out after her alone.

For your enjoyment...a preview of book five in the historical Texas Romance series...due to debut September, 2015

Daughters of the Heart

Chapter One

A sob preceded the slammed door. Cecelia's heartbeat quickened, and she pushed herself up from her water-closet's floor and put the glass back in its place behind the washcloths.

"Poor Gwendolyn. Daddy's such a...."

Actually, no. He wasn't. She straightened her dress and strolled into her room. Footfalls echoed up the stairs. Was that another sob? Her sister's bedroom door banged against the jam, Hopefully, she didn't break it, 'cause if she did, he'd have her doing the fixin', and poor ladyfingers Gwen could never be called handy—other than with thread or yarns.

Though everything in Cecelia wanted to race over, she counted to ten, then hurried across the hall tiptoeing wide steps. Swinging the door back and forth once on its hinges, satisfied her. Nothing broke, all in order, good.

She eased in. Her older sister sprawled across her bed with her faced buried in a pile of pillows. No one slept on as many pillows as that girl.

"Sister, what's wrong? What'd he say?"

Gwen shook her head, but didn't look up. "He's so pigheaded!"

A warm breeze fluttered the curtain carrying the scent of fresh cut grass and the rumble of a tractor's engine. Cecelia sat on the bed and rubbed her sister's back. "I'm so sorry."

She rolled over. "I hate him."

"No! You do not. We all love him, and you know it."

Gwen shook her head. "And I hate her, too."

"Oh, don't say that. What did Mama May do anyway? She hardly ever gets involved."

"Well, that's just it. She sat there the whole time like a bump on a pickle. Didn't even try to talk any sense into him at all. She's a female. You'd think —"

The door opened.

"Hey, you two. What happened? I saw Clay leaving." She stepped inside. "Why'd he go?"

Waving off her baby sister, Cecelia exhaled a relieved sigh it wasn't Daddy. "Go away, Bonnie Claire. You wouldn't understand."

Gwen sniffed then sat up. "No, it's alright. Let her come on in." She patted the bed inviting the twelve-year-old up. "Come on. Close the door."

The baby climbed up next to her oldest sister—well, if she didn't count Rebecca or Mary Rachael—and snuggled in next to her. She put her hand up on Gwen's cheek. "Are you crying?"

"Not anymore. I'll be fine."

"What happened? Did you and Clay have a fight?"

Cecelia looked to her big sister who shrugged then faced the Bonnie. "No, Daddy just said he couldn't come courtin' anymore."

"Oh, no! Why would he?"

"Because supposedly, we're not a good match. At least, that's what he claims. And worse, May just sat there and let him talk."

"Don't call her that, Sister. Really, she hasn't done anything. How could she go against him? Especially in front of you and Clay."

"You weren't in there, CeCe! She just sat there staring at the floor."

"Oh, no." Bonnie's eyes grew wide. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing. What can I?"

"I don't know, but you love him, right? There must be something...."

"I thought I did."

"So? If you love him —"

"No!" Gwen wiped the wetness from under her eyes. "We cannot go against Daddy. No matter what or how pigheaded he gets."

"But Mary Rachel —"

"Exactly!" She rolled off the bed and walked to the window. "You were there, CeCe. The afternoon he got her telegram. Almost like a part of him died. She broke his heart, then Caleb broke hers. Daddy was right all along."

"What about Jethro Risen, though? If she hadn't of runoff, then she never would have met him, and I like him a lot. Don't you?"

"But you cannot think like that, Bonnie! You and CeCe and me, we are true daughters. He loves us more than anything in the world."

“Even Mama?”

“Yes, sweetie, he loves us even more than May. He’s known us longer.”

“And we’ve got his blood. He loves us most.” Cecelia turned toward the window and her older sister. “So what are you saying? You’re just going to quit seeing Clay because he said? Clay isn’t like Caleb, Gwen, and you know it.”

“No, he isn’t. I’m sure of that, but...if Daddy says no, then that’s that. Just means there’s someone else out there for me. Someone more perfect, because Daddy listens to God, and though I don’t understand...maybe I don’t have to.”

“It’s just not right.”

“It is, CeCe. And I want you to promise right now.”

“Me? Promise what?”

“And you, too, Bonnie Claire.”

“I will. I promise.”

“Promise what, Gwen?”

She walked over to the bed and took both her sisters’ hands making a circle. “I want you both to promise with me that you will never break Daddy’s heart. You have to agree, too, or you won’t be a true sister. He doesn’t deserve it. We can never break his heart like Mary Rachel did.”

The baby dropped her hand and Cecelia’s then folded her arms across her chest. “I liked Clay.”

“Bonnie, promise.”

She wrinkled her nose. “But if Clay Briggs isn’t good enough, he’s never going to let any of us get married.”



Clarksville, seat of Red River County, Texas. Finally, the Belle skidded to a stop. Elijah shook his head. Jethro had not lied, couldn’t be a more bustling, quaint place tucked into the woods in all of the state.

He kept to his bench until the other two passengers disembarked, a drummer never at a lack for words and a man about his age who appeared military by his bearing, but refused the salesman’s attempt at conversation.

Good thing. If he’d been as big a talker as the drummer, Elijah would have had to ride with the driver.

Once the stage’s dust settled, he climbed down, retrieved his carpet bag, glanced around the busy square, then strolled into the hotel. What was a Donoho? Had to be someone’s sir name.

Again, he hung back until the other two men booked rooms then

bellied up to the front desk. "Henry Buckmeyer. Could you tell me how I get to his place? Do you know?"

"Yeah, sure I know. You need a room?"

"Not unless Mister Buckmeyer's home is too far to get to by dark. It's my understanding his ranch is near town."

"That's right, only about five miles south of town as the crow flies." The clerk nodded to his right. "Two blocks down is a livery. You can hire a buggy there and just tell your driver. Everyone knows the Buckmeyer place."

Half an hour later, with a map drawn with coal on a burlap seed sack and his new rig—a well-built surrey and a nice little mare—Elijah headed south out of town. The whole trip from California, he hadn't let himself think about Mary's sisters.

But now, almost there, his heartbeat quickened and he could hardly get enough breath for the anticipation.

Jethro hadn't stretched the truth about Clarksville. No reason to think he would varnish the reality of the abundance of Buckmeyer beauty. He could hardly wait to lay eyes on Gwendolyn or Cecelia.

The baby girl, too, except she'd not be old enough to wed for quite a few more years.

Each so beautiful, the sunsets were jealous. That's what his partner claimed.

He'd take himself one for wife if they were half as pretty as their sister. And if cut from the same cloth as Mary Rachel. Besides intelligence, the only thing that surpassed her beauty was the size and sincerity of her sweet heart.



Cecelia handed her step-mother another split peg then chuckled. "A man may work from sun to sun –"

"But a woman's work is never done." May smiled then leaned in close. "How is our Gwendolyn doing?"

Cecelia did a slow three-sixty then shrugged. "She thought she loved Clay, but she won't go against Daddy's wishes. I don't think she never will."

"That's good." May held out her hand.

Cecelia handed over another peg. "Have you asked him yet?"

"No, I wanted to wait until after –"

"Mother. Three-quarters of the girls my age in the county are already married. The rest are so...so...undesirable, no one wants them. I'm almost seventeen. What if all the good ones guys get taken in the next year?"

"CeCe, I said I would talk to him. And I will. But you know how

your father is.” She grinned. “If I can make it seem to be his idea, your chances go up considerably.”

Though she had to agree, she still hated that Mary Rachel had ruined it for her. Just because she ran off and married the wrong man, didn’t mean Cecelia would. Mercy—as the great Henry Buckmeyer would say—if he had his way, she and her sisters might never marry and grow up to be old maids.

The thought broke her heart.

Her bratty brother busted through the back door. “Rider coming! Pro’bly another suitor for Gwen.” Houston put his finger in his mouth and faked a gag. “Pro’bly another gold-digger like all the rest. Why else would someone want her?”

“Samuel Houston Buckmeyer! Watch your mouth, or I’ll hold you down and get Bonnie to give you what for.”

May leaned in close. “Leave him be. He’s just trying to get your goat.”

Well the spoiled little terror already had, but ignoring him did make sense. He only craved attention. When he wasn’t the center of everyone’s, he acted up something awful. She helped finish penning the wash, then decided she’d go see the new suitor.

Wow, word surely spread like a late summer grassfire in Red River County. Clay hadn’t been gone but a few hours.

“Where’s Crockett?” She handed the bag of clothespins to May. If that baby needed seeing to, CeCe loved seeing to it. She couldn’t get enough of that little booger. “Need any help with my baby brother?”

“No, Lacey Rose and Bart are playing blocks with him in the wash house.”

“Guess I’ll go see this new beau, then, before Daddy runs him off.”

“Certainly, you go on. I’ve only got one more load boiling.”

Cecelia leaned in close. “You do know we have folks who will do the laundry.”

“Of course, silly, but I like doing your father’s and Crockett’s. And well, to tell the truth, I’m having a bit of trouble with my latest story. I should never have told Houston and Bonnie I’d pen them a children’s book.”

Strolling through the kitchen, Cecelia snagged a gingersnap right under Mammy’s nose—um, rather, Miss Jewel’s; she loved the beloved cook’s new name—then eased on out into the hall.

Hmmm.

Empty and quiet. Plenty unusual.

And her father’s office door closed in the middle of the afternoon?

What was that about?

She hurried upstairs and tapped on her older sister’s door.

“Come in.”

She stuck her head through a narrow opening. "Who's here?"

"I don't know. Someone to see Daddy I guess."

"Houston said the guy came calling on you."

"That boy. Daddy needs to tan his hide. He's all time spreading rumors. Maybe we ought to take things into our own hands and wash his mouth out with lye soap until he shuts his trap."

"Now there's an idea." She stepped in and waved the door toward shut but never let go of it. "Come on. Let's go see who it is."

"No, I don't much cotton to that idea. Not up to meeting someone new. You know how long I've been sweet on Clay."

"I know. I do, but..." She turned toward the door and stopped before leaving. "Fine, but don't be asking me any questions."

Gwen shook her head then waved her off. Cecelia had to smile. She couldn't help it if she hated keeping news to herself. Mercy, holding stuff in would hurt a body. Everyone knew that.

She eased on downstairs, loafed around the kitchen keeping out of Miss Jewel's way, and only slipping one more snap until her father's library door swung open. She took two steps then froze.

Sweet Lord above, have mercy on my soul!

The man's sky blue eyes met hers, and for a heartbeat, she stared into the windows of his soul. Such an awesome sight! The urge to dive in almost overwhelmed her, but what a good thing she didn't.

If she ever gave in, she may never come up for air again.

Her father stepped toward her. "Cecelia! Come here, sweetness, and meet Elijah Cunningham. He's Jethro and Mary's partner in the Mercantile and gold mine. He's going to build me a steam engine for the mill."

She blinked, and the man looked away. "Good to meet you, sir." She smiled, but not too big. Hopefully, her father had not seen her make the fool of herself. Him and his stupid no-courting-until-you're-eighteen rule.

And just that morning, she'd promised to abide by it.

Hope you'll enjoy all Daughters of the Heart in
September, 2015!

Reach out to the author...

Website <http://www.CarylMcAdoo.com>

Newsletter <http://tinyurl.com/TheCaryler>
(Get FREE books for subscribing!)

Reviewers <http://carylmcadoo.com/christian-evaluators>
(Join Caryl's Street Team!)

Blog <http://www.CarylMcAdoo.blogspot.com>

Facebook www.facebook.com/CarylMcAdoo.author

Twitter <http://www.twitter.com/CarylMcAdoo>

G'Reads <http://tinyurl.com/GoodReadsCaryl>

Google + <http://tinyurl.com/CarylsGooglePlus>

Pinterest <http://www.pinterest.com/CarylMcAdoo>

LinkedIn www.linkedin.com/CarylMcAdoo

Author Pages :

Amazon <http://tinyurl.com/CarylsAmazonAuthorPage>

Simon & Schuster <http://tinyurl.com/S-SCarylsPage>

Email ComeVisit@CarylMcadoo.com

*Surely would appreciate a review if you enjoyed this title,
and for you to pick up another of my books! I'm so glad
you found this one! Without readers like you, where
would I be?*

*Praying my story gives God glory!☐
Blessings, Caryl*